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MASKED RIDER WESTERN

ANC

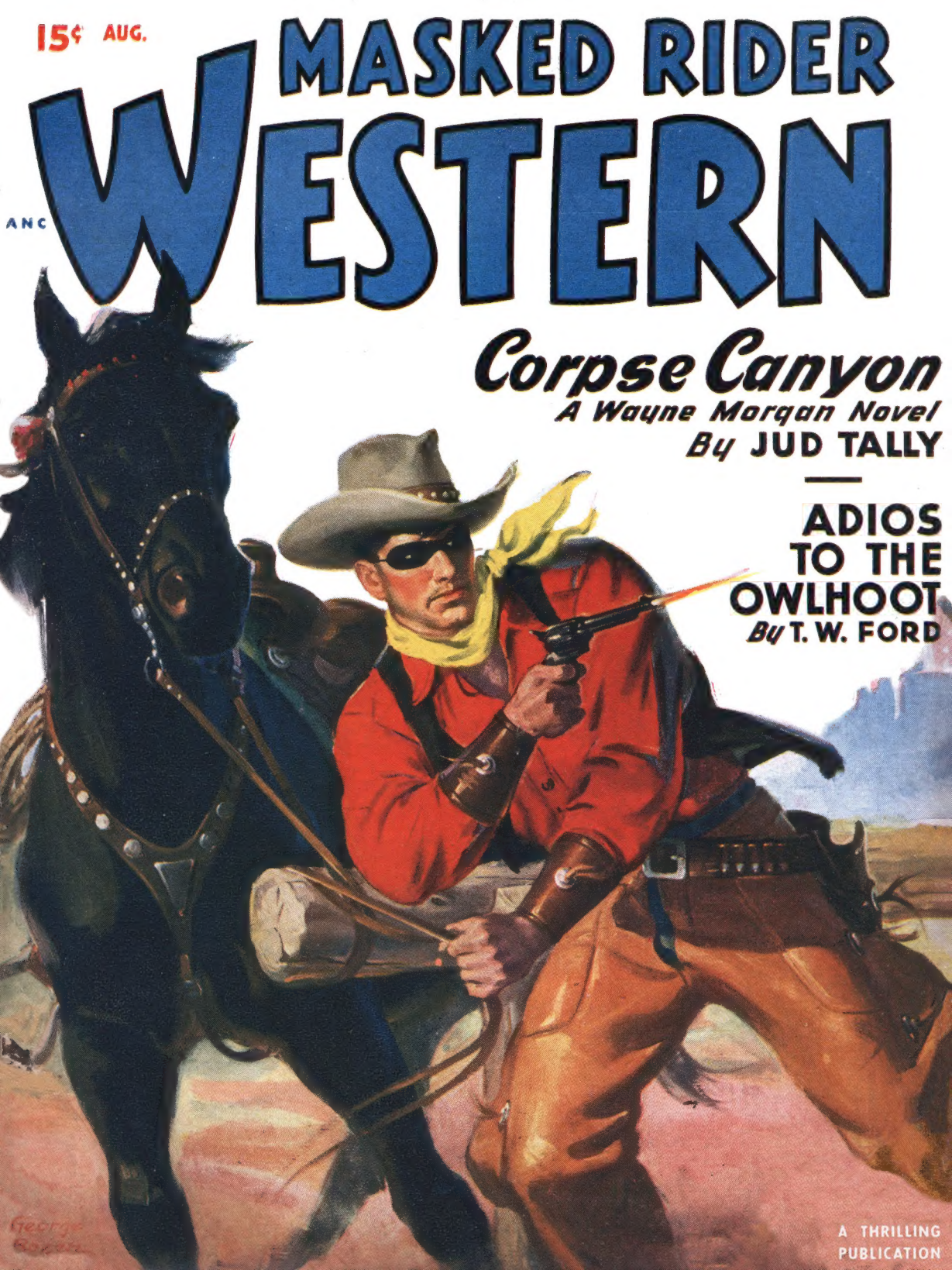
Corpse Canyon

A Wayne Morgan Novel

By JUD TALLY

ADIOS TO THE OWLHOOT

By T. W. FORD



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Corpse Canyon

by Jud Tally

When the Masked Rider sides Mitch Clark, the most hated man in Elkhorn, there's a bang-up eruption of gun-blasting fury! Follow Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk on a range mystery trail 9

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HI WADDIES, welcome to the old corral. Just get your kaks thrown on your cayuses and we will be off on another trail ride and of course there will be the usual trail talk.

Suppose we start our ride out of Chicago and head west. Chicago and that section of the country is now called the middle-west, but there was a time when even that section was considered away out west.

I remember on my first trip to New York City, almost 35 years ago. I was wearing my boots and broad-brimmed Stetson, and I got into a conversation with a fellow who said he was interested in the west, and at the start of the conversation he remarked, "You know I am from the West myself," and when I asked him what part of the West, he said "Chicago." Of course, people who live in Wyoming, Montana, or any of the Western states, consider Chicago way East.

If we travel west from Chicago about one thousand and seventy miles as the crow flies, we will land in Casper, Wyoming, which is really out West. If we take the main traveled highway we will go through Dubuque and Sioux City, Iowa, clear across the state of Nebraska and on into Wyoming. The driving time for the 1,070 miles is supposed to be about twenty-five hours.

We Get Around

We sure get around rapidly these days. By airplane we would make the trip in five or six hours. But in the old days when the pioneers were going westward in oxcarts and prairie schooners, it would take anywhere from about four months to six months to make the trip, according to the amount of trouble encountered, and there was nearly always some kind of trouble in the early days along those westward trails.

On this trip we will pass near Scottsbluff, a thriving little city, named after Hiram Scott, a fur trapper who died in the vicinity about 1828, and there we find Scotts Bluff National Monument, occupying 3,476 acres, and containing the great bluff which rises 800 feet above the surrounding North Platte River, or 4,649 feet above sea level, and from the top of the bluff one can get a remarkable view of the surrounding country and the towns of Scottsbluff and Gering.

The bluff was a prominent landmark on the Oregon Trail, which came by its base and later crossed Mitchell Pass. Evidences of this trail may still be observed in the monument area. The Mormon Trail passed along the north side of the river. Man has added his touch to what nature had already accomplished and has built a paved road which passes through three tunnels in its little more than a mile and a half in length and can now drive his auto to the very peak of the bluff. From the summit of the bluff on a clear day one can see other old landmarks of the old trails, such as Chimney Rock and Laramie Peak.

On the trip we also pass through Valentine, a typical western cowtown, as it is the county seat of Cherry County, the biggest county in the state of Nebraska, and is situated in the best cattle raising section of the state. Here is located the Niobrara Big Game Reserve, containing 18,719 acres, and it is on the site of the former Nobrara Military Reservation established in 1879, to keep the Sioux Indians on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. The refuge is maintained principally to perpetuate the American bison, but a large variety of wildlife is found on

the reserve, including beaver, deer, elk, coyote, mink and a variety of birds.

Old Fort Laramie

We strike Fort Laramie, and two miles from the town there is a national monument by the same name and containing more than two hundred acres, situated near the confluence of the Laramie and North Platte Rivers. Here are preserved the remains of old Fort Laramie, of great historical importance as a trading post and later as a military post on the Old Oregon Trail.

The fort was established in 1834 as a fur trading post by William Sublette, and was a rendezvous for traders, trappers and early day adventurers. It is associated with such romantic characters as Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, "Buffalo Bill" Cody, Gen. John C. Fremont, Captain Bonneville and many others.

It became a military post in 1849, serving as military headquarters for many thousands of square miles of western country. It provided protection against warlike Indians such as Crows, Sioux and Cheyennes.

The tens of thousands of emigrants on the Oregon Trail considered it the most important stop on the journey, as it served as an outfitting station, a place to repair any damages to wagons and vehicles, and a place to get information from travelers, traders or trappers. Historians claim Fort Laramie was the most important post in the West, especially in connection with the great westward emigrations and in military operations against hostile Indians.

The Fort was abandoned by the army in 1890 and the land opened up to homesteading, but a number of the old buildings are still standing and in a fair state of preservation.

In Honor of Buffalo Bill

One town about two hundred miles northwest of Casper is a noted western town from the fact that it was named after one who was perhaps the most noted and colorful western character of all, Col. Wm. F. Cody (Buffalo Bill). Cody is about fifty miles east of Yellowstone National Park, and is in the immediate neighborhood of some of the state's most scenic spots, which include Shoshone Canyon, where the river has cut a

(Continued on page 91)

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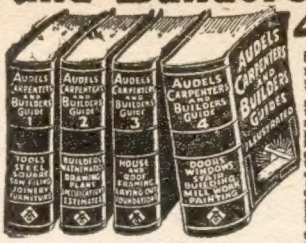

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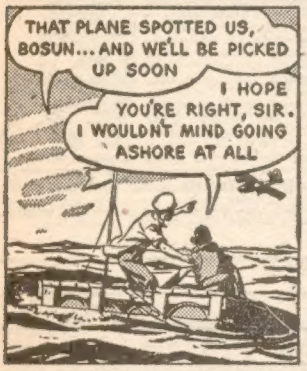

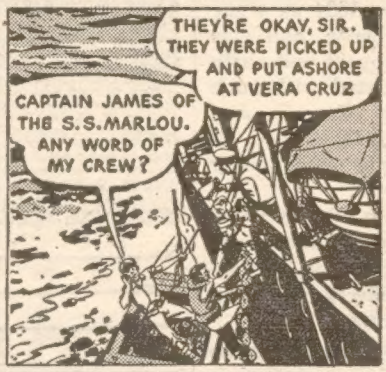

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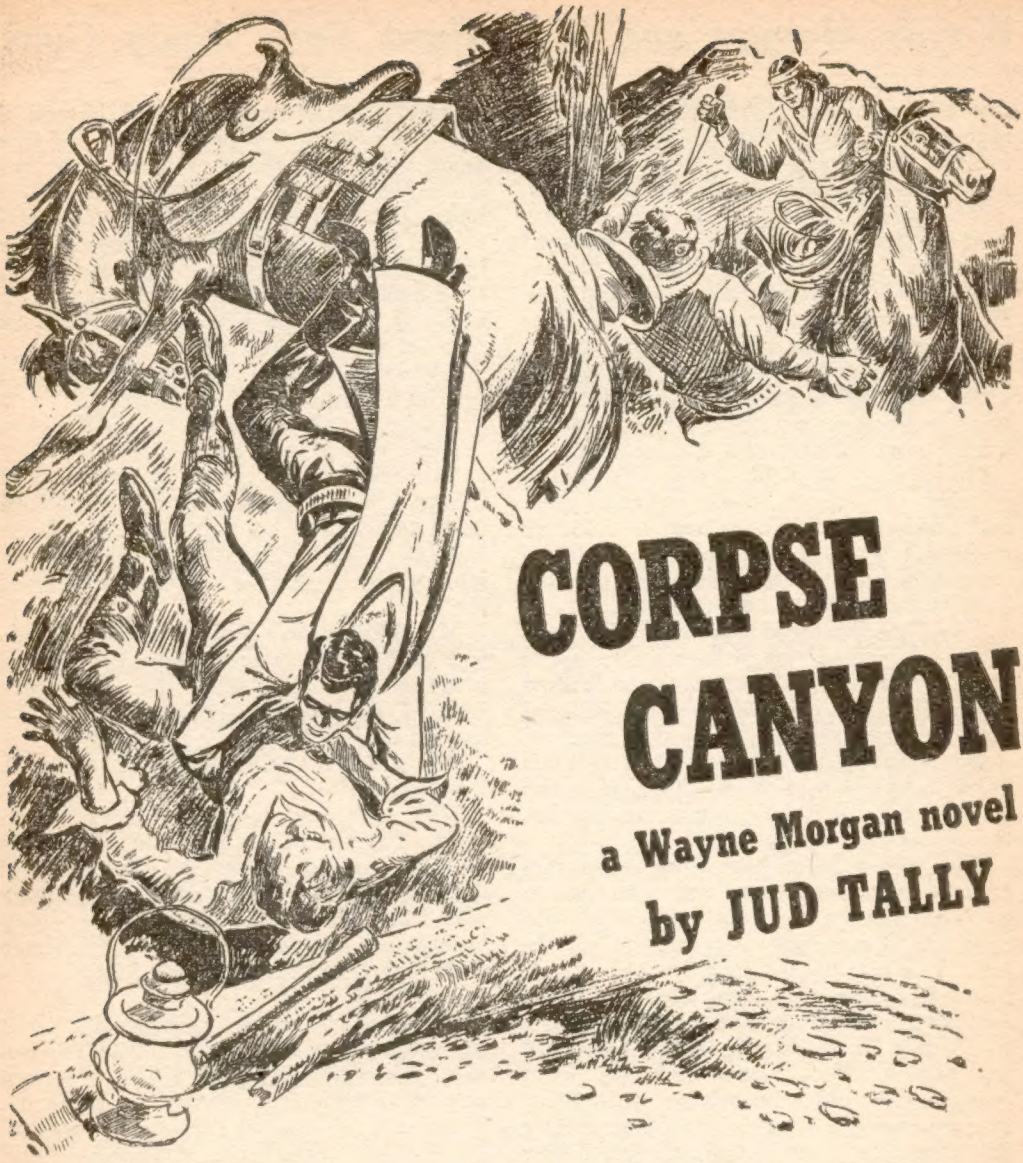


CORPSE CANYON

a Wayne Morgan novel

by JUD TALLY

CHAPTER I

Feud

MITCH CLARK ground hitched his horse behind a clump of trees that bordered the small ranch which Jim Thompson had owned before he was killed by the hoofs of a wild steer. Now Josie, his wife, ran it. Or made an attempt at running it. No one knew any better than Mitch Clark how much of a failure she had been.

Not that it was entirely her fault. She

When the Masked Rider sides Mitch Clark, the most hated man in Elkhorn town, there's a bang-up eruption of gun-blasting fury!

needed time, but Mitch Clark held the mortgage on this ranch, just as he did on most of the others—and Mitch Clark had rarely been known to wait for his money.

He was a flat bodied man of about fifty, with leathery cheeks and a closely cropped mustache. He was also slightly bandy-legged and his steps were short and fast. He wore heavy woolen pants, a buckskin jacket over a dark gray shirt and in the holster attached to the belt around his waist dangled a six-gun. The belt was heavily ornamented with silver and the buckle was massive and eye catching.

He kept out of sight of the ranchhouse, wormed his way through dense bushes and reached a small tree near a well. He glanced toward the ranchhouse to make certain he was unobserved, then quickly bent and scanned the ground.

"Yep," he muttered to himself, "it's been found. Figgered they'd be sure to see it close by the well. Now to face the Widow Thompson, get my ears burned off and have my own money throwed at me."

He returned to where he had left his horse, climbed into the saddle and began riding hard, as if he'd come the far distance from his canyon-top home.

The Widow Thompson, by the appearance of the ranch, would never be able to pay up. The fence corral had fallen into ruin and a makeshift rope corral was in use. The bunkhouse looked as if it was ready to collapse in a mild breeze. Tools left lying around were battered and rusted. Few men would ride with a loser and the Widow Thompson's cowboys were composed of old men whose willingness was tempered by age—or lazy, heavy drinking hands who couldn't get a better job.

Mitch Clark dismounted, tied his horse to the hitchpost and walked up onto the rickety porch of the old, sunbaked ranchhouse.

He didn't have to knock. The door opened and Mrs. Thompson stepped out.

She had an apron over the riding shirt she habitually wore. She was a small woman, ordinarily mild, but now in her eyes glowed a strange mixture of hate and deep satisfaction.

THE APRON was lifted and the end of it was wound around her arms. She stood there as if daring him to enter her home. Mitch Clark politely removed his worn J.B. and bowed slightly. The corners of his mouth started to twitch and he had a hard time trying to control them. He'd been through this before. He always enjoyed it and he was being robbed of none of the pleasure now.

"Afternoon, Miz Thompson," he said. "I reckon yuh know why I'm here."

"Money," she said in a cold voice. "Aren't you always after money?"

"Reckon a man could go after worse things, Miz Thompson. Now I ain't got no mind to be hard on yuh, but business is business and I never make it a point to be lenient just 'cause it's a woman who owes me."

Mrs. Thompson's lips moved in a mirthless smile. Her hands were still rolled into the apron. She said, "Mr. Clark, you know I haven't got the money. You've known it all the time. Isn't that true?"

Clark nodded his shaggy head. "Yes'm, I reckon so."

"If I can't pay, you will take my ranch away. The ranch my husband worked so hard for and died for. You'll take that away when you know there's not another way I can make a living except by doing laundry or opening a hash house. That's what you want, Mitch Clark. Money or—the ranch."

Clark looked properly offended. "I lent the money to your husband, Miz Thompson. When he got hisself killed, the debt passed on to you. I came for my money. If you ain't got it, I'll have to take steps."

"Hold on!" She was smiling now and successfully checking the tears that started to well. "I wanted to hear you say that. I wanted to see what a man of stone looked like. Now I know. Well, here's your money, two thousand dollars."

She lifted her arms out of the apron and let a horde of gold coins clatter to the porch.

Clark stared at the rolling coins, raised his head and gaped at Mrs. Thompson. He scratched the back of his neck and turned slightly pink.

on the Perilous Trail of a Cowtown Mystery!

"Where in tarnation did you raise that money?" he asked.

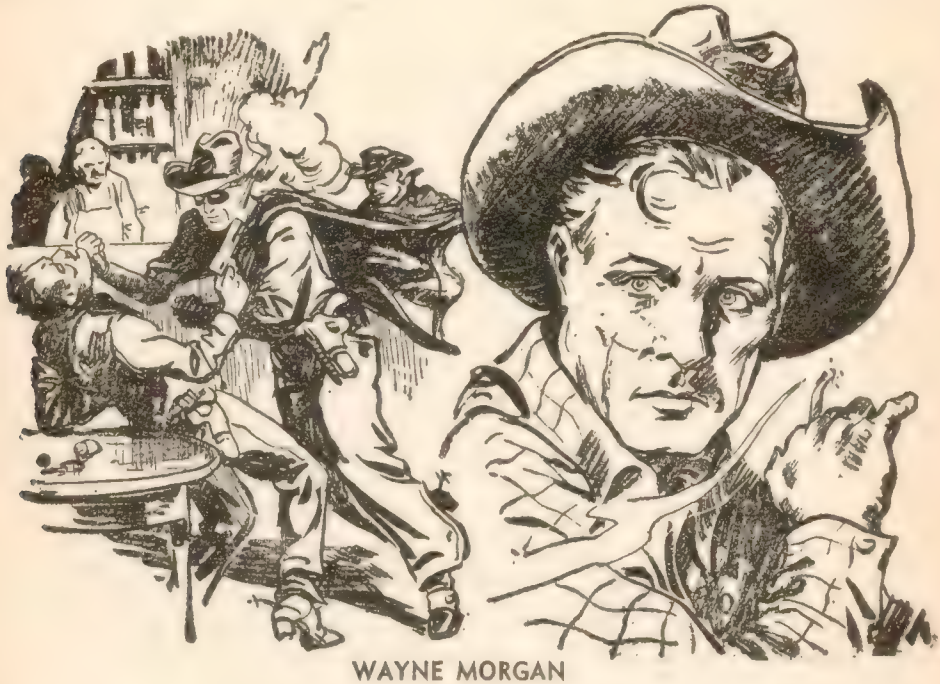
"I prayed for it. That's all there was left for me. Just prayer. But it worked. I got the money. Maybe I found it, that's none of your affair, Mitch Clark. But it's all there and you can pick it up."

Clark said, "I'll send over the papers tomorrow. You sure surprised me, Miz Thompson. Sure did."

gossip too. Mitch Clark, there's not a man more disrespected in Elkhorn than you."

Clark lowered his eyes and went back to work picking up the gold pieces. She threw him a small sack and he spilled the money into it. When he had it all gathered, he walked back to his home. Mrs. Thompson had gone into the house and slammed the door.

As he rode away, Clark chuckled to



WAYNE MORGAN

She had her hands on her hips as she stood watching Clark scramble for the coins.

She spoke from thin lips, in a voice that was strangely harsh for her.

"I'm through with you, Mitch Clark. Unless you kill me like you killed those others who paid off their mortgages and whose ranches you wanted."

"Whoa, Miz Thompson," Clark looked up. "You're talkin' gossip."

"Why don't you ride to Boot Hill and look at the graves of those three men," she challenged. "Maybe you think graves are

himself. Mrs. Thompson and a few other worthy folks had become avid believers in the power of prayer.

A mile out of Elkhorn, his chuckling died away. To his left he saw the wooden crosses of the cemetery. He guided his horse through the gate and rode up to a row of three rather fresh graves. Wooden crosses were raised over each.

They read:

Pete Bode
Simon Miller
Randy Fraser

Below each name someone had used the

snub end lead of a bullet to mark on each whitewashed cross:

KILLED BY MITCH CLARK

Clark shuddered and chewed on his underlip. He was tempted to rub out those accusing words but decided against it. He rode out of the cemetery and at its gate he had a good look at Elkhorn.

ELKHORN lay sprawled out below him. The buildings had taken on a solid permanency. Some were of brick and most all were two stories high. The streets were packed down and no longer dust bowls in hot, dry weather, nor seas of mud after a rain. The wooden sidewalks were new, heavy and would last a long time.

Clark was proud of this town. He'd seen it grow from a cluster of ramshackle sod huts without windows and only a hole in the roof for a chimney. He had fought rampaging Indians around those huts. He'd battled drought and snow, pillaging bands of outlaws, torrents of rain that swept away anything that wasn't fastened down tight.

Now things were different. Elkhorn was far from an ordinary cowtown. A man was perfectly safe on the streets whether he wore a gun or not. There were almost as many women as there were men and three churches flourished.

Clark rode by the blacksmith shop, called out to the men watching the smithy at work. Nobody waved back. The faces of the men seemed to be cut out of granite for all the friendliness they showed. Clark sighed deeply and rode on.

There were few people on the street at this time of day. It was cruelly hot, the sun burning down on all who dared to go out. Clark wiped his forehead with the back of his big, work hardened hand. He rode up to the hitchrack in front of the Range King Hotel.

As his boots hit the ground, someone stepped up behind him and a quirt cut him hard across the back of the neck. Clark spun around, his right hand just above his gun butt. The hand trembled visibly.

The man with the quirt was chunky, dirty and badly in need of a shave. He wore a double gun harness. His bonehandled .44's looked as if they were the only part of his dress that was ever cared for.

Clark said, "You been askin' for trouble. Len Yeary. When you quirt a man, yuh got it."

Len Yeary dropped the quirt and his right hand moved carefully to a position above a gun butt. His lips were twisted in a sneer.

"Mitch, you're a murderin', thievin' snake of a man. I'm sayin' yuh drygulched Pete Bode and Simon Miller and Randy Fraser, I'm sayin' you murdered them for the land they owned which you got when they died. I'm sayin' yuh're a treacherous skunk."

"You said enough," Mitch Clark's voice was tinged with desperation. He was no match for this professional gunman. But Mitch Clark had never backed out of a fight and he didn't intend to do so now.

Yeary was backing up, hand still poised. He began a series of slow curses meant to rile Clark to a high point of nervousness and to bolster his own murderous intent.

Clark made one last attempt to avoid a showdown. "What are you gettin' at, Len?" he asked gravely. "Those men you named were never friends of yours. You don't give a hoot in tarnation what happened to 'em. Yuh say I killed 'em for the land they had. But what do I want with more land when I've got so much now I can't rightly handle it?"

"You'll never have enough land or money," Yeary shouted. "You're a killer who strikes without warnin'!"

Clark stopped him quietly. "Reach, Len, whenever you're ready. If that's what yuh want, I reckon I'll have to oblige you."

Yeary was looking over Clark's left shoulder and Clark was worried about that. It was like Yeary to have someone planted to shoot him in the back.

Then Yeary's hand dropped to his gun butt. Clark drew with remarkable speed. Even he was surprised. He leveled the gun and started cocking the hammer. Then he saw that Yeary was tugging at his weapon, as if it was stuck fast in the holster. But Yeary didn't look scared, like a man with a stuck gun would look. He was still grinning broadly.

Then he wiped that grin from his face. Both hands suddenly jerked away from his body and stayed that way. He was peering down the barrel of Clark's gun and behind it Clark was a puzzled man.

"Don't shoot," Yeary begged. "I ain't aimin' to make trouble."

Davis went catapulting off his horse with a yelp of alarm (CHAP. III)

YEARY'S eyes suddenly went even wider, this time in utter astonishment and he was looking again over Clark's left shoulder. Clark stepped to one side, half turned and took a quick look. Two men were walking toward him. The one in front had his arms raised as high as he could get them. Clark knew him instantly as Slim Davis, a close friend of Len Yeary's.

Behind Slim Davis walked a tall, rangy man with a rolled Stetson set rakishly to one side of his head. He held a gun in his hand and kept the muzzle of it tight against Slim Davis' back.

"You can stop right here," the stranger said coldly. He stepped away from the man, gun still level, until he stood beside Clark.

"Ain't none of my business," he said in a pleasant drawl, "but you was about to be gunned down from behind. This polecat and that skunk yuh got covered, planned this before yuh rode in. The beanpole I got under my gun, hid between the saddle shop and that closed up saloon. When you pulled a gun, after this dirty lookin' coyote talked you into drawin', he was goin' to have trouble with his six-gun. Then the beanpole would plug yuh in the back and say you weren't givin' the dirty coyote a chance."

"Thank you," Clark nodded. "Len Yeary's always been full of them low tricks and Slim Davis ain't none better."

"What'll we do with 'em?" the tall stranger asked. "Turn 'em around and plug 'em? I ain't smart enough to think of any other fitten treatment."

"They say I'm a killer," Clark exclaimed. The whole town thinks I'm a killer. But even though these two deserve to be shot, I couldn't do it or lend my voice to order it done. Let them go, but next time, Len Yeary, you better see to it that that gun of yours don't stick because I'm shootin'."

The tall stranger gestured with his gun. "Run for it, you two, before I wing yuh."

The pair backed off, turned and fled. The tall stranger laughed and put his gun away. He offered his hand to Mitch Clark.

"Name of Wayne Morgan," he said. "From Texas. I work some, ride some and drift a lot. I'm partial to driftin'."

Clark shook hands warmly. "Thank gosh, you drifted this way, Morgan. You sure saved my skin. I'm Mitch Clark."

Morgan nodded. "You ain't bein' sided none, Mr. Clark. There's been a hombre standin' smack across the street in a doorway all the time and danged if he made a move to do anythin' about a killin'."

Clark looked swiftly in the direction Morgan indicated. The man in question realized he'd been seen and he emerged quickly. He strode up to Morgan and Clark. He was a small-statured man, wearing a wide black hat, a bandanna and a coat which he used as a cape despite the intense heat.

Clark said, "Morgan, that's Judge Matthew Turner. He hates the shadow I make. He wouldn't side me if the second bullet was meant for his hide."

Judge Matthew Turner stopped four feet away. "You've been asking for this to happen, Mitch. I wasn't going to interfere. It seemed to be a fair fight to me."

"I been told you're a judge," Morgan said icily. "Do you do your judgin' on the street and let any gunslick be your hangman?"

"I didn't see Slim Davis," Judge Turner said. "But then, even if I had, I couldn't have done much about it. I never pack a gun. As for you, stranger," his eyes bored into Morgan's, "you'll find it healthier not to back a murderer."

Judge Turner turned and stalked away. Morgan laughed and scratched the back of his neck. "It's beginnin' to seem like I sided the wrong man," he said softly. "Seems there ain't nobody around who's got a good word for you, Clark. Maybe you can tell me why you're treated like a hound dog that's gone and bit his master."

Clark said, "I owe yuh that much, Morgan. Come into the hotel and I'll tell yuh the story. It ain't long and it ain't nice, but yuh rate hearin' it."

NO ONE in the small hotel lobby even nodded at Clark. The gray-haired man and the black-haired cowboy sat down in rocking chairs facing the window. Mitch Clark took a slim cheroot from his pocket, offered it to Morgan and chuckled when Morgan waved it away.

"Happens to be the only smoke I got," Clark said. "Foster, who sells 'em here, won't take my money. He was related to Pete Bode—says he ain't dealin' with me."

"And who was Pete Bode?" Morgan asked.

Mitch Clark applied flame to the cheroot, got it going well and leaned back. For a few moments he said nothing, just stared out of the window onto the street which was slowly coming to life again. His face had turned grim, as if he were recalling things which he did not like to remember.

CHAPTER II

Three Missing Men

FINALLY Clark knocked the ashes from his cigar, glanced at Wayne Morgan and began his story.

"It all happened this year," Clark related. "But there's a history to it that goes way back. To the time when me and Judge Turner and Dan Langan built this here town. Built it outa dirt and mud and heat while fightin' bad injuns. The judge, he wanted no land. Just respect and power, which he got. Dan Langan wanted a ranch. A big ranch, and he got that. Me—I wanted nothin' but some land and the right to sit back and take it easy."

"Do they kill men for that in this town?" Morgan wanted to know.

Clark didn't appear to have heard the interruption. "We divided up the town, sort of. That made folks call us thieves, but what we divided was our own. We got here first, is all. Well, sir, things quieted down after that. The town grew and prospered. Me, I just kept sittin' back takin' it easy. Sellin' a piece of land now and agin when I needed quick cash. Loanin' money to them as needed it, and were good people."

"What about these three men they say you drygulched?" Morgan asked.

"I'm comin' to that, Morgan. All three of them boys owed me money. If they didn't pay, I was to get their land. One day, more'n four months ago, Pete Bode meets me right here in this hotel and says he's comin' out to my place and bring the money that afternoon. He never came to see me, but folks claim he did."

"Pete Bode was never seen again?" Morgan asked slowly.

Clark nodded. "You are either a mighty good guesser or yuh been hearin' folks talkin' hereabouts. Then Simon Miller was comin' to see me. Three weeks ago it was Randy Fraser."

"But what makes it look like yuh done away with 'em?" Morgan asked.

"First off, I made money off them when they died. Couldn't pay what they owed me so I took their property. And then, the nights they came to see me, an avalanche was heard."

"Avalanche?" Morgan frowned.

"It's clear you don't know where I live. I got me a house right smack on top of the canyon. You ride a dangerous trail but seein' I don't like many visitors, I planned it that way. If yuh don't have a sure-footed cayuse, yuh're liable to go over the edge. Anythin' falls over into the canyon, it starts a rock slide. Yuh can hear it for miles."

Morgan nodded slowly. "I'm beginnin' to understand, Mr. Clark. They think yuh shoved them three hombres off the canyon edge and they were killed by the rock slide."

Clark studied the end of his cheroot carefully. "You're a man of good understandin', Morgan. I'm wonderin' if you'd like to work for me."

"I hate to say no, Mr. Clark, but me, I don't settle down easy. I like to move on and keep movin'."

"Don't blame you," Clark said. "Used to be fiddle-footed myself. I'm thinkin' about sendin' for a relative to come live with me. But you ain't interested in that. Morgan, did you refuse my offer because yuh think maybe I did kill them three men?"

Morgan looked straight ahead, through the window and onto the street which was now beginning to show signs of life. A few cowhands, quitting the range early, had ridden in. Women were doing their marketing and from the biggest saloon down the street, came sounds of its awakening.

Morgan said, "I been hearin' about yuh, Mr. Clark. They say you not only killed them three men but yuh keep a herd of outlaws riding for yuh. Ain't hardly a ranch in these parts you don't partly own by mortgages. They say if a rancher gets lucky and stands ready to pay, them owlhoot riders come swoopin' down to burn and kill and rustle off the best cattle."

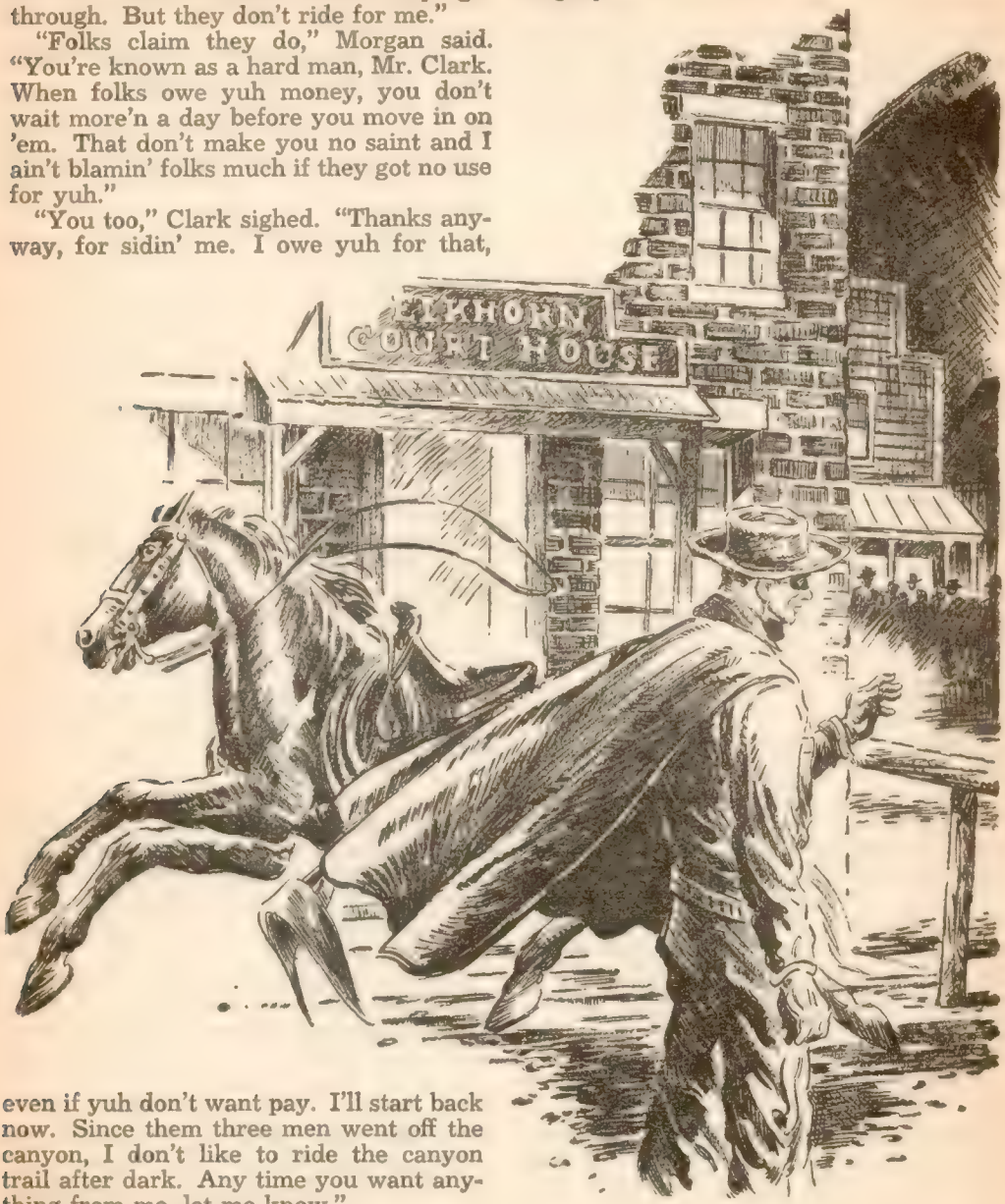
Clark exhaled slowly. "I know there are outlaws who do that and I can't say they ever cost me anythin'. Fact is, I took over six or seven ranches after they got through. But they don't ride for me."

"Folks claim they do," Morgan said. "You're known as a hard man, Mr. Clark. When folks owe yuh money, you don't wait more'n a day before you move in on 'em. That don't make you no saint and I ain't blamin' folks much if they got no use for yuh."

"You too," Clark sighed. "Thanks anyway, for sidin' me. I owe yuh for that, even if yuh don't want pay. I'll start back now. Since them three men went off the canyon, I don't like to ride the canyon trail after dark. Any time you want anything from me, let me know."

"And then," Morgan said slowly, as if he hadn't heard a word Clark uttered, "somebody saw yuh sneakin' around the Larkley place some weeks back. Right before the widow found a sack of gold near the pump. She said she prayed and her prayers were answered because that gold paid you off."

"Morgan—" Clark started to say half angrily.



Morgan went on, ignoring the interruption. "I just heard the Widow Thompson prayed, too, and found gold near her water pump. You know, Mr. Clark, I got faith in prayer but not that much faith.

I been wondering what you know about it."

"Nothin'," Clark said hastily. "Why should I? Those women were no different from anyone else. They owed me money and didn't pay. I would have taken over the ranches just like I took over more'n three hundred other places that owed me. What do I care if folks say I got blood like ice and a heart like stone? I do everythin' legal. Even Judge Turner, who hates me, has to decide in my favor when I sue."

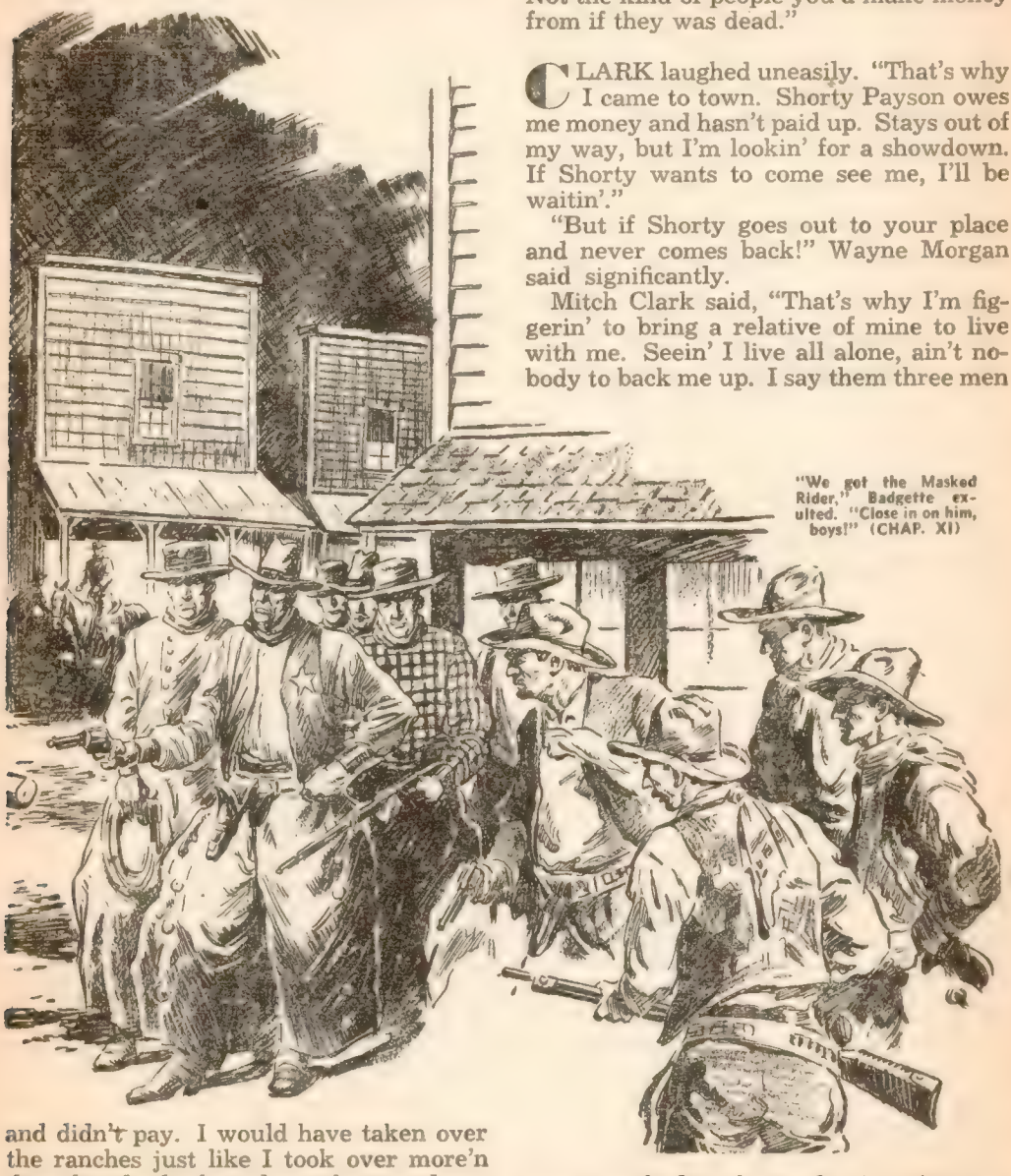
Morgan arose, tilted his hat to one side of his head and grinned a little. "I ain't got much likin' to work for a man like you, Mr. Clark, so I'll be driftin'. Just don't go askin' any more visitors to your house. Not the kind of people you'd make money from if they was dead."

CLARK laughed uneasily. "That's why I came to town. Shorty Payson owes me money and hasn't paid up. Stays out of my way, but I'm lookin' for a showdown. If Shorty wants to come see me, I'll be waitin'."

"But if Shorty goes out to your place and never comes back!" Wayne Morgan said significantly.

Mitch Clark said, "That's why I'm figgerin' to bring a relative of mine to live with me. Seein' I live all alone, ain't nobody to back me up. I say them three men never reached my house, but I can't prove it. I bring Jesse here and I got me a witness."

"It's a good idea," Morgan admitted, "against future trouble. Well, I'll be drift-



"We got the Masked Rider," Badgette exulted. "Close in on him, boys!" (CHAP. XI)

in'. Good luck to yuh, Mr. Clark, and keep your holsters tied down."

Wayne Morgan walked casually out of the hotel. At the foot of the wide staircase an Indian was squatted in the sun. A big hat was tilted down over his eyes. A none too clean blanket was wrapped around his shoulders. As Morgan stopped to light a cigarette, the Indian raised his head a trifle. From beneath the hat brim a pair of beady black eyes, startlingly intelligent, peered for an instant at the tall cowboy.

Morgan spoke in a whisper that couldn't be heard more than three feet. "Follow Clark. Things are shapin' up. Meet me in that box canyon after dark."

The Indian lowered his hat and his head. He gave no sign that he had heard, no indication that he knew Wayne Morgan. The cowboy threw away the match, strolled indifferently down the street and acted like a man who had a lifetime he could waste if he so chose.

He saw the marshal as the lawman came bustling toward him. Morgan sensed that the marshal was going to stop him and he took a careful look at the man. He saw nothing particularly dangerous or alarming. Marshal Wiley Badgette was too fat, short of build, heavily jowled and the meanness of his soul was reflected in the piggish eyes that glinted from beneath heavy, black eyebrows.

Badgette stepped directly into Morgan's path. "I want a word with you, stranger. I'm the law here, just in case yuh don't care to stop and palaver."

Morgan smiled. "Talkin' is one of the best things I do, Marshal."

"I hear gun slingin' is one of yore good points, too," Badgette snapped. "Yuh ain't welcome in this town, Morgan. We don't like gunplay and we don't like driftin' riders who wear their guns low in slick holsters like yores. I'd be obliged if yuh drifted out of here and didn't come back."

"Any law says I must?" Morgan's smile had turned into half a scowl.

"My law says so and the law of Judge Turner says so. Len Yeary and Slim Davis claim yuh drew on 'em without provocation. What was goin' on between Len Yeary and Mitch Clark wasn't none of yore business. Hornin' in that way gets yuh nothin' but grief."

"So you and Judge Turner and Slim and Len Yeary are all together in this. I can understand how two great representatives of the law, Judge Turner and you, can be in cahoots, but where do them gun slicks, Yeary and Davis, come in?"

"They work for Judge Turner and they ain't gun slicks," Marshal Badgette said angrily. "I'm warnin' you, Morgan, for your own health, don't stay in Elkhorn long."

Morgan put the half-smoked cigarette between his lips, frowned deeply and continued his slow walk. Near the end of the street he saw a brick building that looked like a bank, but the name printed in gold on the windows indicated that these were the offices of Dan Langan, Cattle Dealer. Morgan walked up to the building, opened the door and smiled at a pretty girl who worked over some heavy ledgers.

"I'm lookin' for Mr. Langan," he explained. "The name is Wayne Morgan. I got private business with him."

Two minutes later Morgan was in a nicely furnished private office and shaking hands with a heavily built man who had the whitest hair and the bluest eyes Morgan had ever seen.

DAN LANGAN'S age was approximately that of Judge Turner and Mitch Clark. He was dressed in the latest city fashion, even to wearing a coat.

"So you're the man who sided Mitch Clark," Langan said. "I try to stay neutral in this, but I think you chose the right man to help."

"News travels fast in Elkhorn," Morgan commented with a smile. "I hardly thought you'd have heard about me and Mr. Clark."

"This is still a small town," Langan chuckled. "News gets around as fast as if it was sent out in Indian smoke. Now, how can I help you?"

Morgan sat down and gently rubbed his fingers across the smooth, polished surface of Langan's desk. "Mighty nice piece of wood here, Mr. Langan," he said. His eyes raised and looked straight into Langan's. "Mr. Clark offered me a job. Might do me good to settle down awhile. Been driftin' a long spell. I been thinkin' though that maybe all Mr. Clark wants is a guard. That kind of work, for a cowhand's wages, ain't to my likin'."

Langan sighed and shook his head. "Do whatever you like, Morgan. In fact, I'll

even give you a job and it won't be as a gun slick either. As for Mitch Clark, I don't know. The man never did hire anyone to face trouble for him and I can't see him beginning now. However, Mitch is in a bad mess. You might get involved if you go to work for him."

Morgan nodded. "He told me about them three men who went to visit him and were never seen alive again. Do yuh think he killed 'em, Mr. Langan?"

"No," Langan said. "I'll stand up and shout that from the housetops. Mitch isn't a killer. You see, Mitch, Judge Turner and I really started this town. We were together for years and I know both of them, just as they know me. Judge Turner is inclined to be high and mighty since he got himself appointed judge. But Mitch is no different than he ever has been."

"What's Judge Turner got against Mitch Clark then?" Morgan asked.

Langan pursed his lips and looked thoughtful for a moment. "So Matt Turner talked to you. I can tell, because Matt Turner can't hide his hatred for Mitch. They used to be close pards. Close as any two men could be. Then Matt Turner became judge and started hanging men. Mitch got dead set against him, fought his last election and nearly beat him. Judge Matt Turner hasn't forgotten that."

"And these three men who died?"

"Nobody knows what happened to them," Langan said slowly. "I guess it can be proven that they started for Clark's place all right. But you can't prove they ever got there or that Mitch saw them. If there was any proof, Judge Turner would have Mitch locked up in a second."

"What about them outlaws who just happened to raid folks who were able to pay Clark, and when them raiders got through there wasn't anythin' left and Clark just took over?"

Langan shook his head. "It's talk, Morgan. Plain gossip without a fact to back it."

"Facts ain't needed sometimes." Morgan arose and stretched his six-foot length of supple body. "Guess I'll mosey along, Mr. Langan. Workin' for Clark ain't the kind of work I'm lookin' for. Might get to hang from the other end of the rope they'll use on him. Thank you kindly."

Langan watched the lanky cowboy walk out, sighed and went back to his work.

CHAPTER III

Canyon of Death

AT SUNDOWN Wayne Morgan went to the stable where he'd left his horse. There he paid his feed bill, saddled the hammerhead roan and rode to the hotel where he'd stayed the previous night. He went to his room, came downstairs a few moments later carrying a rifle, saddle bags and bedroll.

He settled his bill and was soon riding lazily out of town.

On his way he caught sight of Mitch Clark walking briskly and half angrily along. Townspeople made it a point not to see him. Well behind Clark moved a shadowy figure—an Indian wrapped in a blanket and shuffling noiselessly on moccasined feet. Mitch Clark saw the lone rider, came to a stop and waved. Morgan waved back, casually, as if he didn't care much whether he acknowledged the greeting or not.

Clark's shoulders went down another notch. He plodded on and the silent Indian shuffled after him.

Morgan hummed softly in cadence with the beat of hoofs. He looked and acted for all the world like a cowboy who preferred a restless wandering life to one settled down on some ranch as a regularly paid hand. If he had a care in the world, he didn't show it.

But there was far more to Wayne Morgan than being an itinerant cowhand. The drifting cowhand act was only a part of his life. Wayne Morgan was also the Masked Rider—a tall, caped and masked outlaw who rode a jet black stallion and roved the cow country lending aid to those who were oppressed, bringing terror to their oppressors. As Wayne Morgan, he was law abiding and seldom seeking trouble. As the Masked Rider he courted it and he obeyed laws only so far as they did not interfere with whatever mission he was trying to accomplish.

When necessary he became a practical outlaw and there was a price on his head, though the evil reputation attached to him was not of his doing. Other outlaws had posed as the Masked Rider to carry out

their schemes of murder and robbery. The real Masked Rider was blamed and bounty hunting sheriffs, marshals and plain citizens were on the alert for him.

THOSE who had actually encountered the Masked Rider no longer followed an active chase for the man. They'd discovered how he could wield his fists and how he could draw those black .45 Colts and fire with a deadly and uncanny accuracy. They came to know that beneath the black domino which covered the upper part of the Masked Rider's face, was a man gifted with brains, a brisk temper and a perfect co-ordination of nerves and muscles.

Near that box canyon, which he had mentioned to the stolid, dozing Indian back in Elkhorn, a jet black stallion and a pinto were waiting. Well hidden, trained not to move even when only ground hitched, they were reserve transportation when needed. The black stallion, aptly named Midnight, was as well known as the Masked Rider. There were many who claimed that horse and master acted like one fighting machine.

Only one other person in the world knew that Wayne Morgan and the Masked Rider were the same man. This was Blue Hawk, a stalwart Yaqui Indian, educated in a mission school, and a faithful follower of the lonely Robin Hood outlaw's fortunes. The two comrades had ridden many a dangerous trail together. They had saved each other's life more times than they could remember. They were truly brothers—this white man and red man, who roamed the West together. They had built up the legend of the Masked Rider who was forever champion of the underdog, defender of the weak, avenger of the oppressed.

Wayne Morgan ceased his song when he was out of town. His careless posture vanished. He sat erect in the saddle of the hammerhead roan. His eyes seemed to have grown sharper, for his brain was now working hard in an endeavor to figure out why three men had vanished and why the fourth man was suspected of murdering them.

He'd heard of these mysterious circumstances many miles from Elkhorn. Those tales had intrigued him. The stories told around campfires and in saloons, always pictured Mitch Clark as a grasping, evil man. It was even said that he had recruited a band of outlaws to help him, and that he profited heavily from their raids. The fact that ranchers had been preyed upon was the circumstance which had brought the Masked Rider to the scene.

As Wayne Morgan, however, he had met Mitch Clark, seen him almost fall victim to a cowardly murder scheme. Now the Masked Rider doubted strongly that Clark paid an outlaw band or had murdered three men. Clark was miserly, tight-fisted and heartless, without question. He was a man who lacked friends and had attained the unenviable position of being the most hated person in the vicinity. Yet, all that didn't make him a killer.

The night was very dark, but the roan cantered at a steady pace, sure footed and unalarmed by night sounds. Suddenly Morgan pulled up hard. In the distance he heard hoofbeats—those of only one rider. He guided the roan off the trail, behind a tree and let his hand drop to the butt of a Colt.

It was impossible to identify the lone rider who appeared. He wasn't riding hard through the gloom and he went past Morgan's hiding place only a short distance away.

Morgan was tempted to ride out and intercept him but decided against it. He wanted everyone in Elkhorn to believe that Wayne Morgan had drifted out of the section as casually as he had appeared. The rider, apparently unaware that he was being watched, soon vanished.

Morgan nudged the roan back onto the trail, kept the animal at a slow pace and centered his thoughts on the mystery of the three dead men.

Suddenly a shot from a rifle whizzed near his head. The gun flashed to his left and not very far away. A voice came out of the darkness.

"Morgan, you are covered. Unbuckle them .45s and let's hear 'em drop in the dust. Then pull the rifle out of the boot and drop that, too."

Morgan knew he was a perfectly silhouetted target. He'd fallen into a trap solely because he hadn't expected one, and had foreseen no reason for one. Yet here it was. He was at the mercy of the rider who'd ridden out of the darkness

to trail him and who guessed that Morgan had left the trail to hide.

Morgan unbuckled his gun belts, carefully held them at arm's length and let them drop. Now that his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, he made out the dim form of the man who held a rifle trained on him. Wayne Morgan knew that he would be killed instantly unless he obeyed those commands, but even if there had been a chance of escape, he would have preferred to face whatever danger was in store for him. For some reason, the enemies of Mitch Clark were taking action against the cowboy, who had befriended the older man. Wayne Morgan craved to know why.

HE SLID the rifle out of its boot and threw it into the brush. Then he elevated both arms high. The rifleman didn't make a move, just sat there astride his horse and held the rifle aimed straight at Morgan.

Then the sound of another approaching rider became clearer. This man called out and Morgan's captor answered him. Both men closed in then and Morgan saw that they were Slim Davis and Len Yeary, the two gun slicks who worked for Judge Turner. Yeary was the man who'd ridden by first and then taken up a stand to trap Morgan. It was Yeary who gave the first order.

"Start ridin', cowboy, and keep yore hands high. We ain't got far to go."

"So you're scared to face me when I'm wearin' my guns," Morgan derided. "But yuh ain't afraid to jump me from the dark like a hungry coyote."

"Shut up," Yeary growled. "We ain't takin' that sort of talk even if our orders say we just bring yuh in!"

"Yuh talk too much, Len," Slim Davis snapped. "Morgan, start ridin'."

Morgan shrugged, used his knees and urged the roan into a canter. From the way these two men spoke, their orders were to bring him to someone. That means whoever paid them wasn't afraid to come into the open now. Did that mean he'd perhaps won whatever he was after? Or did it mean that Morgan was to be killed, anyway? That what he saw or heard would make no difference?

"Take the left fork in the trail," Yeary ordered.

"That goes to the top of the canyon and Mitch Clark's place," Morgan said. "Why take me there?"

They didn't answer him, but he knew they had guns trained and would shoot if he made any attempt to avoid climbing the trail which led to the canyon where three men had already died. Morgan was thinking like lightning now. Apparently he was being taken to Mitch Clark. But that seemed an impossibility.

In the first place Clark would hardly have hired the gun hands who tried to kill him only a matter of hours ago. Secondly, Clark was in no position to order anyone about. He was a man without friends. Morgan began to realize that whatever the plans of Yeary and Davis might be, they meant no good either to Mitch Clark or himself.

Somewhat vaguely, Morgan became aware that the two men were dropping back gradually. He took a chance and looked around fast. The guns still covered him, but Yeary and Davis were much farther back. He wondered what that portended.

The he heard the song of the rope, but too late to take advantage of the warning. The rope settled around his arms, just below the shoulders. He was jerked out of the saddle and flung heavily to the trail. Then the dragging began.

For an instant he was afraid they intended to run him down. Their horses came pounding up the trail. The rope was slack, but Morgan was winded and by the time his strength returned the rope had tightened again. He managed, however, to slide his arms out of the loop but it still encircled his chest and when the dragging began once more the rope went up under his armpits.

He used both hands to seize the rope and hang on, saving himself from worse injury. He knew he was far up on the trail, probably on the narrow strip which led to Mitch Clark's home.

Morgan hit a boulder which projected above the ground. It threw him sideways and he rolled over fast in an attempt to free himself of the rope. Suddenly he felt himself go over a sharp edge—and then there was nothing below him. He dropped a distance of eight or ten feet before the rope yanked him to a stop. He faintly heard Yeary's voice in a shout of triumph.

Then he knew what they intended to do. He was meant to go down the wall of that canyon and drag with him shale and rock which would rip his body to shreds and bury him under tons of stone. In a moment Yeary would free the rope and let it go.

MORGAN, swinging slightly, raised both legs and thrust them out. He encountered the canyon wall, gave himself a hard push and swung out further. Then, like a pendulum, he came back and this time his whole body hugged the canyon side.

He reached out to feel of the wall and find some perch to which he could cling precariously while he tried to squirm out of the rope. He had to rely almost entirely upon his sense of touch because he had never peered down this canyon to see whether or not there were ledges or crevices.

There seemed to be rocky substance beneath his feet. He rubbed boots against a solid surface, but he could barely touch it for he was suspended just above this ledge or whatever it was. Morgan realized then, that he had to take one of the gravest chances of his danger-filled career.

If the ledge was wide enough to balance on, he might be saved, provided that he could get out of the rope, maintain his balance and not let Yeary and Davis know that he was free.

They wouldn't wait very long, up there on the canyon trail. Yeary was, in all probability, getting set to let go the rope. Morgan's hands gripped a craggy piece of rock. Slowly he pulled himself up a few inches until he could feel the rope loosen. He hugged the canyon wall, contorted his arms and shoulders and gradually became aware that the rope was slipping up along his extended arms.

Now everything depended upon luck. Without it he was a doomed man. Morgan suddenly let go of the rocky crag. With the rope well up around his arms now, his weight caused him to slide through the noose.

For one agonizing second he hung there. Then he dropped the few inches to that ledge which he had felt with his feet and into which he had placed all his faith. Boots encountered the narrow projection, fingers clawed at jagged rock wall, finding slight purchase and enabling him to cling there like a fly and regain some of his strength and wind.

The rope, with its loop narrowed, had slid down until it dusted lightly across the top of his head. He paid no attention to this. Seconds were precious now. It wouldn't take Yeary long to realize the end of his lariat no longer held a potential victim.

Sidestepping a few inches, Morgan discovered that the ledge widened a bit, until he had a secure foothold on it and he could lean against the canyon wall and retain good balance. Now and then his feet moved small rocks and he held his breath for fear they would roll down and cause Yeary or Davis to peer over the edge of the canyon.

Morgan knew that no more than a minute had passed since he slid out of the rope. Now he reached out his right hand, found the rope and put some weight on it. At the same time he wedged a boot behind a fairly large rock on the ledge and then he waited.

The rope suddenly grew slack. Yeary had let go. Morgan pulled on it very hard, let out a wild scream and kicked the rock off the ledge.

As the rope came down in a twisting, snake, like contortion, the rock began hurtling down the side of the canyon. What Morgan heard then he believed he would carry with him to his grave. At first there was just the rattle of the single rock rolling down the sharp incline. Then, as the whisper of a crowd grows into a roar, the rockslide began to grow.

It grew and grew into enormous proportions as hundreds and then thousands and finally millions of stones, large and small, began crashing down the canyon. Flatter pieces of shale slipped, pushing more and more ahead until the roar became that of a gigantic waterfall.

Morgan, clinging to the wall, shuddered. His body would have caused that slide as effectively as the rock he had sent hurtling down. But under cover of the frightening racket made by the slide, he had to try and crawl back to the top of the canyon. If his feet or hands unloosened any more stones, their fall would never be heard above this terrible roar.

He looked up, saw jagged pieces of rock projected out against the backdrop

of the sky. He tested one protruding rock, secured a firmer grip and hoisted himself up until his feet were balanced on that same piece of stone.

IT WASN'T too hard. Near the top of the canyon, there were plenty of rocky ledges for here no slides had chopped away projecting pieces to make a smooth wall. In four or five minutes, while the canyon still reverberated to the slide, Morgan was within reaching distance of the top.

He pulled himself up and over. The roar was dying away now and through its reduced proportions, he heard exultant voices and the hoofbeats of the murderers' horses.

Morgan lay prone, chin buried in the short grass, eyes scanning the darkness until he saw the outlines of the two mounted men. He was unarmed, shaken by his close encounter with death, and he rested there until strength flowed back into his muscles.

He wriggled forward a bit, heard a gentle whinny and recognized it as the hammerhead roan he'd been riding. Morgan began crawling. The roan was no more than fifty yards away, head lifted, nostrils twitching in excitement.

Morgan kept going: Yeary and Davis were turning to begin their getaway. Morgan rose to his full height and began running. It was Yeary who spotted him and gave a wild yell of rage. Guns stabbed the darkness, but Morgan was an elusive target.

He reached the side of the roan and was in the saddle with a single leap. The roan reared up. Morgan whispered soft words and quieted the animal down.

Yeary and Davis were riding toward him. If he tried to outride them, they would shoot him off that horse. There was only one thing to do—charge straight at the pair. Morgan needed no spurs. The roan was a bundle of excited nerves and at the least touch of his toes, Morgan sent the horse leaping toward the pair.

They were too astounded to open fire until it was too late. By then Morgan's horse had run full tilt into Slim Davis' smaller and lighter animal. Davis went catapulting off with a yelp of alarm.

Yeary fired twice, but when Morgan sent his roan dancing about to repeat the charging attack, Yeary turned and fled. Morgan went after him. While his back was turned, Davis skittered across the trail, climbed into the saddle and was racing away.

Morgan let them go. Without a gun he couldn't stop them anyway. A sudden weakness came over him. The roar in the canyon had dwindled to a muted clatter. Great clouds of dust rose up and hung above the canyon like a cloud until wind swept them away. Morgan dismounted, walked to the edge of the canyon and looked over. The weakness he endured became greater. He gathered all the strength he could summon and got into the saddle. Aching in every joint, he rode the backtrail.

Soon he was at the spot where he'd been trapped. His guns still lay on the trail and he retrieved them. He found his rifle and thrust that back into the boot. Then he rode slowly toward the spot where he had originally camped and where he was to meet his friend and ally, Blue Hawk.

CHAPTER IV

Letter to Jesse

SOON Mitch Clark gave up his hunt for Shorty Payson. The small ranch owner, who owed him money long past due, seemed to have dropped out of sight. Clark had a good idea that Shorty had taken pains to make himself scarce.

Clark ate a solitary dinner at the hotel dining-room. He later gulped down several drinks of whisky at Jake's Place. It was crowded, but none of the conversation was directed his way. Jake served him with the same cordiality he would have shown a rattlesnake.

Clark gave up finally. He walked down the street to the stable where he had left his horse. Once he thought he heard someone following him. When he turned, the only person he could see was a half-asleep Indian, hidden under a blanket, who squatted at the doorstep of an unoccupied store. Clark shrugged and went on.

When he entered the stable, the Indian suddenly stood erect. He was tall, slim

and looked nothing like the slumped, lazy postured redman who had been squatting in the dust. He wrapped the blanket around him and with long, graceful strides that were almost a run, he hurried away.

Clark rode his horse out of the stable, turned toward the canyon trail and wished he had taken more to drink at the bar. About five bottles more. Anything, even a roaring drunk, was better than enduring this silence and the unspoken accusations of everyone he met.

He reached the canyon trail and as he rode along the rim, he tried to puzzle it out. What had happened to those three men? Not one had reached his home. The night each had vanished, there had been rock slides, true. But would three men in a row meet the same kind of accidental death?

Clark pulled up his horse quickly and his nostrils flared. He could smell the dust of sliding and crashing rock. There had been another slide tonight—and not very long ago.

Clark shuddered and wiped sweat off his face. Maybe Shorty Payson had ridden out to settle his debt. Maybe the rock slide had buried him, as it had buried three others. Clark let out a gasp of horror and used spurs on his horse.

He flung himself out of the saddle as he rode up to the big house he had spent a fortune in building. It was perched at the very end of the canyon trail. On three sides was nothing but air, with drops of several hundred feet. Here Mitch Clark had wanted to perch like an eagle on its nest. Here he sought the solitude he craved—and found it. Found much more, including murder.

"Jeremy," he yelled. "Jeremy!"

The yellow light of a match flared in the doorway to the barn. Then the stronger light of a lantern gave more assuring brightness. It bobbed along in the hand of a stooped, wizened creature who smelled like the barn and wore cracked boots and dirty clothing.

"You home so early, Mitch?" Jeremy asked in a quavering voice. "How's things in town? They treat yuh any better'n last time?"

"Jeremy," Clark said, "there's been another rock slide. I could smell the dust."

"Yep, reckon there was a mite of one. Only lasted couple of minutes."

"Was anyone here? Did you hear anyone ridin' in this direction?"

"Nope—nary a soul, Mitch. Been here all the time. Awake, too." He yawned sleepily. "Heard nothin', saw no one. Guess I can go now—if yuh say so."

"No! No, wait a few minutes, Jeremy. Got somethin' I want yuh to do. Won't take long. Only a letter to write. Be right back. I—ah—you certain nobody came tonight?"

"I been settin' here since afore dark," Jeremy said scornfully. "I'm tellin' yuh there ain't been man nor critter here. I got eyes, ain't I?"

Clark said, "I'm sorry. I'm just riled up, I guess. Be right back."

Clark entered his home. The big living room, complete even to a piano which nobody in all of Elkhorn could play, had once seemed tremendous. As big as a palace, but now it cramped Clark. He went to another and smaller room which he used as an office. There he sat down at a desk, drew paper and pen toward him and began to write.

MITCH CLARK'S education had never progressed very far and writing to him was absolutely painful. He finally managed to scrawl a brief letter. It was more like a note. He carefully blotted the paper, turned to the envelope and wrote on it:

Jesse Clark
Gravois Ave.
St. Louis, Mo.

He picked up the letter and read it aloud.

Dear Jesse:—You bin saying for long you would come to live with me. Now I need you bad. Come quick. On next Tuesday stage, if you can make it but come quick.

Clark folded the letter crudely, jammed it into the envelope and finally applied mucilage to the flap. He sealed it and carried it out to where old Jeremy waited.

"Take this letter and mail it pronto," he said. "It's important."

Jeremy moved the letter up and down across the palm of his hand as if weighing it.

"Can't help noticin' it's wrote to somebody with the same name as yores, Mitch. Yuh ain't askin' somebody to come live here?"

"Might be," Clark said.

"Relative? Is it a relative yore askin'?"

"Might be. What's it to yuh, Jeremy?"

"I get paid to work for one man. If more'n one comes, I'm quittin' lessen I get more money."

"We'll talk about that later," Clark said. "Now get goin' with the letter. Don't tarry none on the way, yuh hear?"

Jeremy snorted something, entered the barn and came out astride an animal almost as sorry looking as himself. He had the letter clutched in his hand and he lazily quirted the horse. It paid no attention to the whip and Jeremy didn't act as if he expected it to.

Clark went back into the house. He felt some better. With Jesse living here, things might be different. At least, he'd have someone to back up his story if he claimed another victim hadn't reached his home before he vanished.

Jeremy, meanwhile, waited until he was almost off the narrow canyon trail. Then he stopped, took a knife out of his pocket and gently pried at the envelope flap. The glue hadn't dried very well yet and he had little difficulty in pulling the flap free. He drew out the letter, unfolded it and lighted a match. In its feeble light he read the message. He blew the match out, thrust the letter back into the envelope but left the flap open as he had no immediate way of glueing it. He put this into his greasy hat, dug heels into the ribs of his horse and started her into a gallop.

Jeremy reached the narrowest part of the trail, where brush grew close on both sides. He kept applying the quirt to his surprised animal and he was making good time when a heavy branch swept out of nowhere and hit him full in the face. There was force enough behind it to throw Jeremy completely out of his saddle. He fell with a thud that knocked him senseless.

A shadowy figure stole out of the darkness, moved without sound to the side of the fallen man and bent over him. He removed the hat, which had remained on Jeremy's head somehow. From it he extracted the letter and quickly read its contents.

It was a matter of seconds to replace the letter into Jeremy's hat and affix it on his head.

The lithe figure moved rapidly away to where a gray horse was waiting silently for his master. In a short time Jeremy got to his feet, called down curses at his horse and upon himself for not seeing the branch which had swept him out of his saddle.

He made certain he still had the envelope and then he rode away. This time without using quirt or spurs.

The slim form of the man who had set this trap, leaped into the saddle of the gray. For a moment man and beast were immobile. Around the head of the rider was a white bandeau. Starlight glinted in black, intense eyes. Then the gray moved off, sure-footed even in the darkness.

There was little resemblance between this rider and the lazy, sleepy Indian who had trailed Mitch Clark from Elkhorn to his canyon home. Who had crept close enough to hear Clark talking to Jeremy and then been waiting to observe when Jeremy opened the envelope entrusted to him.

ARRANGING a tree branch so it would sweep a rider out of his saddle was no new trick for this Indian. He knew many tricks, some of them much more involved and much cleverer. For this man rode with the Masked Rider. This was Blue Hawk, the Yaqui Indian who was the Masked Rider's constant companion.

His black hair was long enough to reach his shoulders and was tied back out of his eyes by the bandeau. He wore a dark shirt and trousers with a sash around his middle in which he carried a sheath-knife. There was a rifle in the saddle boot beneath his right leg. He carried no six-gun. The knife was enough for Blue Hawk during close fighting. The rifle could ward off attack and in his blanket roll he carried a medium-sized bow with a supply of arrows. The weapon of his forefathers could serve him very well indeed.

Blue Hawk spoke excellent English, though a trifle clipped in his Indian fashion.

He had a happy knack for masquerading as a stupid, lazy Indian whom no one would ever suspect for the ally of the Masked Rider.

Blue Hawk headed now for the rendezvous at the box canyon, a meeting he

hoped would actually take place. For Blue Hawk had seen the trail left by Morgan's dragged body. He'd noted the marks of Morgan's hammerhead roan. Blue Hawk read signs better than anyone the Masked Rider had ever known. And Blue Hawk had read these signs correctly. He knew that it was Morgan who had been dragged.

He knew that, although Morgan must have been injured, he had been able to make off alone.

There was hope in Blue Hawk's heart—and fear also.

Hawk rode with the easy grace of the Indian, almost a part of the horse itself. He never wore spurs but his gray responded to the slightest touch of moccasin heels. The Yaqui topped a ridge, pulled the gray up for a moment. From somewhere in the darkness came a weird cry. It was repeated and any passing native would have sworn it was the cry of a mountain lion. But Blue Hawk knew better.

This weird cry was the signal of the Masked Rider.

Blue Hawk returned the cry, and even the gray seemed to recognize the relief that came with the cry. It meant that Wayne Morgan was alive and, at least, strong enough to give the signal. Blue Hawk rode like the wind now, leaning half out of the saddle, back hair not pinned down by the bandeau streaming out behind him.

HE SAW the gleam of the well hidden campfire a moment later and as the gray went streaking past it, Blue Hawk slid from the saddle, landed on his feet and kept going. Not until he reached a point ten feet from where Wayne Morgan lay, did Blue Hawk suddenly bring himself to a halt.

This was his friend—the man he loved and respected and obeyed. But Blue Hawk was an Indian. His face had been aglow until now. It became impassive, granite-like. Only in his eyes did he show the relief and happiness that surged within him but which his inbred nature would never allow to escape.

"There has been trouble, senor?" Blue Hawk asked quietly.

Morgan managed a grin. "You might call it that. I was roped and dragged, and they meant to throw me off the edge of the canyon."

"I read the sign, senor. I figured that is what happened. How did you escape from those men?"

"By the skin of my teeth—and hands," Morgan said wryly and held up torn fingers and palms. "I was meant to be victim number four of the canyon rock slide."

"And these men?" Blue Hawk asked with a steely note in his voice.

"Len Yeary and Slim Davis," Morgan said. "Just in case they get me you will know who to go after. Maybe they wanted to kill me because I sided Mitch Clark in town. Maybe they thought I might take up Clark's offer of a job and they didn't want anybody stringin' along with Mitch Clark."

"Clark," Blue Hawk answered, "has sent for one named Jesse Clark. This his enemies already know."

BLUE HAWK went on, telling Morgan how he had trailed Clark, then switched to Jeremy who had read the letter and apparently hurried off to show it to someone else.

Morgan puffed on a cigarette. "Seems like they sure don't want anybody near Clark. They'll try to stop this Jesse, Blue Hawk. Maybe then they'll play enough of their cards so we can do somethin' about it."

"Senor, I see there is blood on your clothes."

Morgan nodded. "I'm cut up some and got more swellin's than a bullfrog. It's a good thing Jesse Clark ain't expected till the Tuesday stage. I'll need that much time to feel whole again."

"It will require less time than that, senor," Blue Hawk promised. "I will go now and gather the bark and herbs which have served my people so well. This medicine will also serve you."

"It has before," Morgan said. He began laying plans. "We'll intercept the stage and see what this Jesse Clark is like. If he swings a mean gun maybe we won't be needed so bad here."

Blue Hawk paused a moment. "We came to fight this man Clark, senor. Now it seems we side him. You believe then, that he is the persecuted one?"

"I'm positive of it," Morgan said. "And I mean to get at the truth."

CHAPTER V

Stagecoach

CUTTING deep into the heart of these pine-clad foothills was the valley, and the trail ran beside a creek of formidable proportions. The hillsides were brilliantly verdant. Halfway up the south incline, a row of cedars stood like sentinels at attention.

Behind them were two riders. Two eerie looking men. One wore a black sombrero, a black shirt and a cape that draped smoothly over his sturdy shoulders. The upper part of his face was covered with a black domino mask. He sat a jet black stallion, a big and beautiful animal.

Beside him was Blue Hawk, the Yaqui, and both men watched the mouth of the valley for the first dust which would signal the coming of the stage.

"You did real well," the Masked Rider said. "You found out many things in town these last couple of days, Blue Hawk. Like Judge Turner wantin' to be a senator and Mitch Clark swearin' no hangin' judge will ever go to Washington."

"Senor," Blue Hawk said quietly, "if Clark so wishes it, Judge Turner will never become a lawmaker. Clark's influence reaches far beyond the borders of this state."

"Sure, I know," the Masked Rider agreed. "But if somebody is tryin' to get Clark strung up, Judge Turner has a mighty good reason."

"He is a stern and severe man, senor. He has ordered many men hanged."

"Then what you learned about Langan is interestin' too," the masked man went on. "He's been tryin' to get a lot of the land that Clark owns. Langan is an ambitious man, Hawk."

"*Si*, and ambitious men are dangerous men," Blue Hawk said.

"Langan runs a big spread, but he ain't satisfied. He owns half of Elkhorn too. Almost as much as Clark. Judge Turner, like a fool, sold out to Clark and Langan years back."

"It is well to remember that the men who tried to kill you, senor, work for Judge Turner," Blue Hawk offered.

"I ain't forgot that, Hawk. What I'd like to know is who them outlaws who raid ranches around these parts, work for. Nobody seems to know who they are, or where they come from. I'm thinkin' about it."

"Senor!" Blue Hawk pointed one arm toward the mouth of the valley. "The stage comes!"

"*Bueno*," the Robin Hood outlaw approved. "You know what to do, Hawk. Stay covered for now. Well, here I go to welcome Jesse Clark and tell him he ain't walkin' into no picnic."

The masked man barely nudged his jet black stallion and the sleek animal moved surefootedly down the incline. Blue Hawk had already rolled a large boulder into the middle of the trail. The stage would have to stop.

It was dusk, hazy now and difficult to see. The stage rocked along at a fast clip, the driver seated erect on the box with the guard half asleep by his side.

Suddenly the driver half arose and pulled hard on the reins while he called

[*Turn page*]

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the horses to a stop. The lumbering stage halted a dozen yards from the boulder. The driver awoke the guard and they blasted the countryside with their curses.

Between them they soon had the boulder rolled aside. They clambered back onto the box. The driver clucked, slapped the horses with the reins and the stage creaked forward.

Neither driver nor guard heard or saw the masked, cloaked man who darted from the brush, seized the door of the stage and yanked it open. He hoisted himself up and into the coach, closed the door behind him and then gaped at the only passenger.

She was pressed back into the corner of the seat, her eyes bright with terror. She had dark hair and brown eyes and she was small and trim. Her hands were raised, palms outward, as if to ward off this masked bandit.

"Don't—don't you dare come near me," she cried.

THE Masked Rider sat down heavily in the seat opposite her. "I ain't meanin' you no harm, ma'am. Reckon I'm as surprised as you. I expected to find a man."

"I'm the only passenger. If you want to rob me, I have a little money."

The masked man chuckled. "I'm no bandit, ma'am. When did the man passenger get off?"

"If you're not a bandit, why do you wear a mask?" she demanded, ignoring his question.

"I'm the Masked Rider," he told her. His voice was low, almost a growl, but pleasant enough. It bore no similarity to the drawl of Wayne Morgan.

"The—the Robin Hood outlaw? The man I heard about clear back to St. Louis?"

The Masked Rider tried not to show his impatience. "Ma'am, I'm here on a mission that could mean life or death. I want to know what happened to the other passenger—the man I asked you about. I been trailin' this stage for miles. He couldn't have jumped out."

"There was no other passenger," the girl said slowly.

The stage bobbed and careened and the girl almost pitched off the seat. The Masked Rider quickly transferred himself to her side and held her back. Her hat fell to a crazy tilt, she clung to his arm tightly and finally they both laughed.

The Masked Rider said, "Jesse Clark got on this stage at Big Rock Creek. What happened to him?"

"I'm Jesse Clark," the girl said slowly.

"You!" he gasped. "You are Jesse Clark? Mitch Clark's relative?"

"I think that is what you call a niece," she said with a growing smile. "I was named for my grandfather and perhaps Jesse is a man's name. But how did you know I was coming and what does all this mean?"

The Masked Rider groaned, leaned back and went limp. Then he began to chuckle and the chuckle became a laugh until Jesse Clark stamped her foot.

He said, "I'm sorry, ma'am. But I'm not the only one who has been fooled. Your uncle is in trouble. Very serious trouble, and we thought he was sendin' for some tough relative who could stand by his side and shoot."

"Do you think I can't?" she demanded hotly.

He grinned at her. "Ma'am, I'm not sayin' anythin'. But even a mite of a girl like you can get into trouble."

"I'm twenty-two," she said sternly.

"Yes, ma'am, and you don't look it." The Masked Rider removed his sombrero and bowed gallantly. "But what I mean to say is that this stage will be held up pretty soon by outlaws who are meanin' to shoot Jesse Clark. That's why I rolled a rock to stop the stage and get aboard with my warnin'. I'm not sure the stage driver or the guard can be trusted."

JESSE CLARK swallowed hard. "But—but maybe they'll hear you."

"Not in this coach. They couldn't hear a screech-owl screeching down here. I'm thinkin' you got nerve, Miss Jesse. As much nerve as if your first name belonged to a man. Your uncle needs help. I'm aimin' to do what I can, but he needs you, too. You might find things a mite rough for a while."

"I've wanted to come and live with Uncle Mitch for years," Jesse said. "I'm not afraid. I'm a nurse. Nurses learn not to be afraid. If Uncle Mitch has enemies, I'll stand beside him and face them."

"I think you'll do it, too," the Masked

Rider said in approval. The blue eyes shining from behind the mask were full of admiration for this girl.

"Besides," she went on with a tilt to her chin, "I can get Stacy Turner to help if need be."

"Stacy—Turner?" the Masked Rider frowned. "Is he related to Judge Turner?"

"His only son. Why, do you know Stacy?"

"No, ma'am, only his father. How'd you meet him?"

"He was in medical school in St. Louis. We met at the hospital. We—may get married, if he ever asks me."

"Then I'm hopin' he does, and soon, or the hombre hasn't enough sense to be anybody's husband. Miss Jesse, I'm leavin' the stage when they slow down for the next bend. I'm ridin' on ahead. Don't worry. And get to Mitch Clark fast as you can."

"But you said that outlaws were going to hold up the stage."

"They won't be there when the stage is," the Masked Rider promised. "I'll be obliged if you tell only your uncle that I talked to you."

The stage was slowing. The Masked Rider opened the door enough to squeeze through. Then he leaped into the darkness. Jesse Clark pulled the door tight and took a good grip. The stage was gaining speed again.

Eight miles ahead, in a narrow defile, two men were working hard in the glow of a lantern. Ax blades were biting deeply into the trunk of a tree, planned to fall directly across the trail. At this point there was no backtracking, no rerouting the stage. It had to pass this point and, if the trail was blocked, no stage would go through.

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk knew of this point also and had figured that if the stage was to be stopped it would most likely be at this spot. Here the outlaws could strike swiftly, block the stage and be far away before the driver and guard could reach town.

Blue Hawk heard the tree crash. Heard it over the drumming hoofbeats of his gray and the Masked Rider's Midnight, the black stallion especially trained for the work in which its rider took part.

"*Senor*," he called. "Below—a tree has crashed. There is no wind to blow over even a dead tree."

"The stage can't be more than two miles away," the Masked Rider said. "It is time, Blue Hawk."

The Indian nodded, pulled his Winchester free of its boot and levered a cartridge into the chamber. Together the two men rode swiftly toward the sound of the crash. They couldn't muffle the noise of their rapid approach but they came so swiftly that neither outlaw had a chance to mount. They were racing for their horses when the two avengers of crime came sweeping in.

The Masked Rider rose high in his stirrups, slid feet out of them and as Midnight went flashing by, the Masked Rider leaped from the saddle. He landed atop one of the pair, brought the man down hard and pinned him there.

The second outlaw skidded to a stop and drew a gun. Then hoofbeats seemed to pound within his skull. He saw Blue Hawk leave the back of his fast-moving gray. The outlaw tried to bring his gun to bear, but he was much too late.

As he hit the ground, a knife flashed before his eyes and the point of it struck painfully against his throat. He could feel a tiny rivulet of blood running down his neck.

"Let him up." The Masked Rider had backed away. There were two guns in his fists. "Get over beside your partner." He gestured with one gun, and Blue Hawk's prisoner promptly moved.

AT THE Masked Rider's command both prisoners unbuckled gun belts and Blue Hawk whisked them away. The Masker Rider studied both men, strangers to him.

"Who sent you?" he demanded. "Who paid you to kill Jesse Clark?"

"We ain't arguin' with the Masked Rider," one outlaw growled. "It was Len Yeary paid us. But it was only to take this here Jesse Clark away and keep him hid. We didn't aim to kill nobody."

"You're a liar," the Masked Rider snapped. "But we'll let it pass. Take off your boots."

Blue Hawk promptly took the two pairs of leather boots aside as the captives obeyed. The Masked Rider stood silent until this was accomplished. Then he said, "Now, gents, take off your pants."

"Pants! Look, we can't go nowheres unless we got pants."

"You savvy English? Then take off your pants before I perforate them with lead. The idea is that you don't go any place—very fast."

Blue Hawk went to work with his knife then. He slit the trousers into ribbons, cut the boots into small pieces and threw them away into the night. At a signal from the Masked Rider, Blue Hawk mounted and rode off. The Masked Rider then holstered his guns.

"This is a warnin'," he told the pair. "Next time I run across you I'm shooting on sight. That goes if I catch you anyplace west of the Mississippi or north of the Rio Grande. Take yourselves a pasear East, boys, and don't come back."

The Masked Rider whistled once and the black stallion moved up beside him. He mounted, brought the stallion around sharply and rode off to join Blue Hawk.

The Yaqui said, "Was that wise, *senor*, to let such men go free?"

"Perhaps not," the Masked Rider confessed. "They'll head for Elkhorn. Maybe through them we can reach whoever is out to get Clark. I'm stayin', Blue Hawk, until this fight is over and we find out what happened to those three hombres who rode for Clark's canyon home and got themselves killed."

"This girl, she is very pretty, senor?" Blue Hawk asked stolidly.

"Very pretty," the Masked Rider admitted. "And very much in love with Judge Turner's son. That makes it bad, Blue Hawk, because Judge Turner is out to fix Mitch Clark no matter what he has to do."

"You think Judge Turner may be the one who has caused these men to vanish, senor?"

"Could be, Blue Hawk. After all, Yeary and Slim Davis work for the judge and there's no question whose side them sidewinders are on."

"There will be trouble, senor, much trouble," Blue Hawk said impassively. "For this girl the son will turn against the father. Such things are never good."

The Masked Rider held up his hand. "Listen! That's the stage. Blue Hawk, there is no way to drive the stage past this barrier. Or even turn it around. Once they're in this pass they'll stay until help comes to drag the tree away. Blue Hawk, why would two outlaws do this when it is so easy merely to hold up the stage, kill the person they were told to kill and get away?"

Blue Hawk gazed straight ahead. "Should there be too many guns on the stage that these outlaws must run away before committing their deed, then the stage is still trapped and Jesse Clark cannot reach her uncle. It is double surety, senor. They felled the tree on orders. Men who are outlaws are too lazy to do such hard work unless commanded to do so."

"Sounds about right, Blue Hawk. That means they've somethin' planned for tonight. We've got to get Jesse Clark out of that stage and get her to Mitch Clark's home as quickly as possible. Wait here. When you hear my cry, follow."

"As you say, senor," Blue Hawk answered.

The Masked Rider wheeled Midnight, and horse and rider were enveloped by the darkness. The stage, lumbering on, was traveling too fast for this narrow defile. The driver had been over these roads so often that he knew every turn, but he didn't know that an impassable tree was to stop him. Not until the lead horse shied at the obstruction, turned and brought the stage around so fast that the right wheel snapped.

FREIGHT came crashing from the roof. Jesse Clark clutched wildly at the seat and somehow kept from falling out. The guard was thrown off but was unhurt. The driver scrambled down amidst blue curses.

"I guess this does it," he finally managed. "Ain't a chance of fixin' that wheel and if we did, how'd we git around that there tree? No, sir, this is where we camp for the night."

Jesse Clark barely hid her anxiety. "But we must be close to Elkhorn. Couldn't I go afoot?"

"Yuh wouldn't reach the foothills, ma'am," the driver shook his head. "I can't let yuh go. Might's well make yoreself as comfortable as possible. Got a blanket on top yuh can have."

Jesse did not protest as she was peering toward the brush bordering one side of the trail. She could make out the outlines of the masked and cloaked man, who was

signaling to her. Jesse strolled idly away from the rear of the stage.

The driver called out, "Ma'am, I wouldn't go far in the dark."

"I'll be close by," Jesse called back. "I'm not afraid."

Then she was beside the Masked Rider and his hand was tight against her arm. He led her quietly and swiftly toward a spot where two horses were waiting.

"Can you ride?" he asked.

"Y-yes. Yes, I can ride."

"Good. I'll help you mount. Then stay close behind me. If someone else joins us, don't be afraid. It will only be a friend of mine. Are you ready?"

"But-but I don't understand!"

"I'll tell you as we ride. There isn't time to waste, Miss Jesse. Your uncle's life may depend on how fast we get to his side."

"I trust you," she said simply.

CHAPTER VI

Dead Men's Canyon

THERE were lights in Mitch Clark's canyon-top home when three figures rode along the trail in single file. Jesse Clark rode between the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk. They were all silent, all mentally praying that they were not too late.

Blue Hawk spurred his gray past Jesse and to the side of the Masked Rider.

"Senor," he said, "there has been no rock slide. No dust."

"You're right," the Masked Rider agreed. "Maybe we got here in time. Miss Jesse, your uncle is a mite quick on the trigger these days. Maybe it would be best if you went on ahead and sort of broke the news about Blue Hawk and me."

"Of course," Jesse replied. "You'll like Uncle Mitch. He's a harsh man on the outside and soft as butter within. Don't let his growls scare you."

She could ride as if she had spent a lifetime in the saddle. Even Blue Hawk grunted in admiration as the pinto carried her off into the night. The Masked Rider dismounted, fashioned himself a cigarette and Blue Hawk soon joined him.

Blue Hawk said, "Senor, why does someone hate Mitch Clark so? That three men have already died to help some scheme?"

"I wish I knew the answer to that," the Masked Rider answered. "So far as I can understand it, Judge Turner hates Clark enough to do this to him."

"You do not believe that Mitch Clark killed those three men?"

"No, Blue Hawk, I reckon I don't. Clark ain't the right breed for a killer. I—look! A lantern is bein' waved. That's for us. Now you'll hear and see Mitch Clark and perhaps side with me that he is not a murderer."

"It is only for the senor to say and I believe," Blue Hawk said simply.

Jesse and Mitch Clark were waiting on the porch of the house. Clark still wore his gun, but his right hand was extended in a cordial welcome as the masked man stepped on the porch and approached him.

"Heard about yuh, of course," Clark shook hands warmly. "Some say yuh're nothin' but an outlaw. Others tell me yuh're the dangdest fighter of crooks there is. Maybe now you can settle the question in my mind. Are yuh outlaw or honest man?"

The Masked Rider laughed. "Suppose we say I'm a little of both, Mr. Clark. Right now there ain't much time for palaver. Anybody been to see you tonight?"

"Not so far," Clark admitted. "I went into town and waited for the stage. When it didn't come, I figgered somethin' happened to delay her so I came on home. Danged stage is late more often than not, anyways."

"You had no visitors at all?"

"Not the kind that walks up to a man's front door," Clark replied. "What I'm wonderin' is how them snakes knew Jesse was comin' on that stage."

"Your mail was read," the Masked Rider told him. "By that hired hand of yours who also works for somebody else."

Mitch Clark's face turned red. "After all I done for him. In the mornin' I'll boot him out of here. He's in town now, gettin' hisself drunk I suppose."

"Did you see anyone else in town?" the Masked Rider persisted.

"Yep, saw lots o' folks, but none of 'em saw me. I'm a low-down murderer in the eyes of everybody in Elkhorn. And I

never killed a man yet."

"Let's go in the house," the Masked Rider suggested. "Somethin' is in the wind, Mr. Clark. They figured Jesse was a man and apt to side you with guns. So they tried to stop him or kill him. That means they got plans for tonight. Otherwise, it wouldn't have made any difference if Jesse got here."

The three of them entered the house while Blue Hawk softly moved off into the darkness.

It was midnight when they heard the beginning of the rock slide.

The Masked Rider leaped swiftly to his feet, sped to the door and raced out into the night.

STEADILY the slide was gaining momentum. This seemed a dozen times worse than the slide which the Masked Rider, as Wayne Morgan, had caused. It seemed as if the whole canyon side was slipping to the bottom. The sound was like a hundred big waterfalls. Huge rocks cracked and broke with loud reports. Trees which had survived other slides were carried down with this one. Great clouds of dust began to boil out of the canyon and the familiar acrid odor met the Masked Rider's nostrils.

There were no signs of Blue Hawk. The Yaqui never vanished like this unless something important came up. The Masked Rider, for one terrible moment, wondered if Blue Hawk had been thrown into the canyon.

Jesse, afoot, came hurrying to where the Masked Rider was holding Midnight in check.

"What does it mean?" she called anxiously above the now diminishing roar of the avalanche.

"I don't know for sure," the Masked Rider told her. "But if a fourth man went down with these rocks and they try to say Mitch Clark pushed him, we're here to swear he didn't. Maybe that's the reason why they didn't want you to get here tonight."

Jesse started to talk, but the Masked Rider held up a gloved hand for silence. In the distance he heard the clatter of hoofs. There were at least two horses. The Masked Rider dropped his hand to the butt of one gun, fingers closed around it and then relaxed. For out of the darkness came Blue Hawk, with a second horse in tow.

Mitch Clark, armed with a rifle now, came hurrying from the house. He looked in amazement at the horse which Blue Hawk was leading.

"Where did yuh find him?" he asked in sudden horror. "That there is Shorty Payson's horse."

Blue Hawk said, "Man fall off this horse into canyon. More men not far away. I tried to catch them. I failed."

"Then Shorty Payson must've gone down the side of the canyon," the Masked Rider said. "Clark, was Shorty supposed to come see yuh tonight?"

"I forgot about him," Clark admitted. "You happen to be right. Met Shorty in town and he said he had money for me. Said he was comin' out to see me tonight. Shorty plumb slipped my mind when the stage didn't come and there was no Jesse."

"Blue Hawk," the Masked Rider said crisply, "ride quickly to the house and fetch two lanterns. Mr. Clark, you and Jesse would be safer in the house. I'm goin' down into the canyon and find Shorty Payson—if he is there."

TWO hours later the Masked Rider returned to Clark's house. Blue Hawk promptly took up a position just off the porch, where he was obscured by darkness but from where he could observe anyone approaching.

Jesse had made some good hot coffee and the Masked Rider gratefully drank a cup.

He said gravely, "Shorty Payson is down there, Mr. Clark. He's dead. Chewed up by the rocks. But it's Shorty Payson all right."

"They'll say I killed him." Clark lowered his head and stared at his empty coffee cup. "They'll say I pushed him off before he could pay me and clear title to his property. They'll string me up for it, Masked Rider."

"But, Uncle Mitch," Jesse protested, "we were all here. We can swear you couldn't have killed him, that he never even reached the house. So someone else must have thrown him into the canyon. Don't you see—now you have help."

"That's right," the Masked Rider said. "I couldn't do much, seeing I travel with a

bounty on my head, but Jesse here could swear to it."

Mitch Clark looked up. "What do yuh think I ought to do about it, Masked Rider?"

"Nothing. Sit tight and let your enemies start things. Maybe that'll flush 'em into the open. Somebody's after your scalp, Clark. If you don't find out who it is, he'll get you one of these days. A man's luck only runs so far."

"I'll do as yuh say." Clark seemed actually cheerful. "If there's trouble, I'm bankin' on you for help. You see, I don't have any friends."

"So I been hearin'," the masked man said.

BLUE HAWK

CLARK drew a deep breath. A regretful expression crossed his features.

"Reckon I been hard. Too danged hard. But I always paid my bills and I expect others to do the same. For years I been pridin' myself on what I helped do for Elkhorn. Ain't a cleaner, better town this side of the Mississippi. Got more womenfolk here than any other city as far west as this. Folks, honest ones, like to live here because there ain't no crooked gamblin', drunken fights, and a hombre who uses a gun always gets himself locked up pronto."

"Elkhorn is known for hundreds of miles," the Masked Rider agreed. "You did well, Clark."

"Not just me. Dan Langan and Judge Turner helped. Between us we kept bandits out of here. We sold only to them that were proved honest. Folks with cussed streaks in 'em ain't wanted and we wouldn't sell them property. If them that were already here turned into jaspers who make trouble, we drove 'em out."

"You been too graspin'," the Masked Rider said. "Folks don't like that."

"I'm beginning' to realize it," Clark admitted. "Ain't a soul don't believe I killed them three men—and now Shorty Payson. They swear it's owlhooters I hired who raid the ranchers who got gold enough to pay me off. I'd believe that myself, I reckon. No other ranchers get hit. It ain't hard to think bad of a man who is hated like me."

"You can change your ways," the Masked Rider said. "I think you will and I'll be around about to side yuh. You may not always know it, but I'll be there."

CHAPTER VII

Jail Visit

YEARS of riding the owlhoot had made the Masked Rider a light sleeper. It was well after dawn that his ears, flat against the thin blanket he used for a pillow, picked up the distant drum of hoofs. As he opened his eyes and rolled over on his back, one hand came from beneath the covering blanket with a six-gun.

He didn't awaken by degrees. His life had depended too often upon instantaneous awakenings. Every nerve and muscle was attuned for trouble. Then he relaxed, for it was Blue Hawk who rode over the rimrock and down the narrow trail to the Masked Rider's hiding place.

Blue hawk looked no more solemn than usual, but the Masked Rider caught a glimpse of worry in the black eyes of the Yaqui. Blue Hawk didn't speak until he had stirred up the fire and put on coffee to boil.

Then he said, "Mitch Clark in jail. They say he will hang for killing this man who died last night, senor."

The Masked Rider gave a deep sigh. "I was afraid of that. It's why I sent you into town to keep an eye on things. They didn't wait long to take action, did they?"

"At dawn the marshal rode out with two deputies. They bring back body of dead man across saddle and have Mitch Clark tightly tied."

"How is the town taking it?" the Masked Rider asked.

"Too early to tell. But a few speak before sleeping Indian and say it is time Mitch Clark die for his sins."

"There might even be a lynching," the Masked Rider mused. "Blue Hawk, I'm going into town. As Wayne Morgan. I'll say I heard about the arrest and came back to see if I could help Mr. Clark again."

"Senor, what if they do talk of lynching? Or there is fast trial and he is to hang? Then what?"

"He won't be lynched," the Masked Rider vowed. "And he won't be hung legally either. Not if I have to gun my way in and shoot his way out."

"You will not be alone should that become necessary," Blue Hawk said softly. "Coffee is ready. We eat."

Their fare was simple, as it usually was when they were riding an action trail. The Masked Rider relaxed against an aspen tree, smoked a cigarette and tried to puzzle out why Mitch Clark had been arrested for a murder he couldn't have committed. From what the Masked Rider knew of Elkhorn's history and the past activities of the three men who founded it, he realized that Mitch Clark was not well liked.

Clark, Judge Turner and Dan Langan had actually started this town, helped it grow and profited by its expansion. Judge Turner had turned to law and the glory of public life. Dan Langan had acquired a large ranch. Both became prominent in town and kept old friends and made new ones.

But Mitch Clark had retired to the solitude he'd wanted for so long. He'd built himself a large house at the end of a trail so narrow that a six-gun could have defended it against a posse. There he'd imported expensive furniture from the East. He'd set himself up in a living standard far above that of anyone else in Elkhorn. This drawing away from other people hadn't endeared him, and when he refused to invite anyone to his home, he insulted the town. People began to resent him. He was tolerated only because he was wealthy and owned much land, but when something happened which could be halfway logically blamed on Clark, the town was ready to believe it.

The Masked Rider guessed that it would be all but impossible to impanel a jury which would be fair. Judge Turner would preside and his hatred for Clark was well known. Somewhere in the past, their friendship had ended on notes of violence. Judge Turner apparently would relish the idea of sending Clark to the gallows.

The Masked Rider arose, made up his bed roll and tied it to the cantle of his saddle. Blue Hawk had prepared the hammerhead roan. Midnight was tied up in a safe and well hidden spot. It was Wayne Morgan, wandering waddy, who swung into the saddle of the roan.

"Ride into town later," he told Blue Hawk. "Keep your ears open and be ready to side me if things get rough."

"Blue Hawk will be nearby," the Yaqui promised.

WAYNE MORGAN rode easily in the saddle, half slouched over. He bore no resemblance to the erect riding habits of the Masked Rider. As he entered the outskirts of town he whistled as if he didn't have a care in the world and he rode straight to the jail.

A few people were gathered in a small group not far away. Some of them turned baleful glances his way, as if they'd heard he'd befriended Mitch Clark once already. But nobody tried to stop the tall, slow-moving cowboy.

Marshal Badgette dragged boots off the edge of his desk, slid back in the swivel chair and glared at Morgan. "If I rightfully remember," he said, "I warned you to get out of town and stay out. Last I knew yuh took my advice. Why are yuh back?"

Morgan said, "I heard my friend Mitch Clark has been arrested. I came to see him, Marshal. You can't deny me the right. Not without considerable argument."

"Ain't lookin' for no argument." Badgette got to his feet. "Any citizen can see Clark, pervidin' Clark wants to see him. Hang yore gun belts over on that there hook."

Badgette unlocked a heavy wooden door, revealing a barred one behind it. This, when opened, permitted entrance to the rear of the building which had been turned into four cell rooms. Mitch Clark was the lone occupant. He jumped to his feet as Badgette and Morgan walked toward his cell. The eagerness on his face faded somewhat when he made out Morgan's identity.

"Yuh want I should let this hombre talk to you?" Badgette asked. "It's yore legal right to refuse."

"I'll talk to him," Clark said. "Morgan, if yuh'd rode with me yesterday this mightn't have happened. Why did yuh come back?"

"Struck me," Morgan replied, "that yuh needed help more'n ever. They tell me yuh drygulched a man."

"I did not. I've told 'em over and over again that I can prove it. When Shorty Payson went over the rim of the canyon, I was in my house with two people who can swear to it."

"Why ain't they swearin' then?" Morgan wanted to know.

"One of 'em was the Masked Rider," Clark groaned. "How do I know what trail he rides or how I can reach him? The other was my niece Jesse. She was here and said they asked her questions and she told 'em she was with me when Shorty went over. They know Jesse ain't no liar. But they ain't lettin' me out."

"There must be some way to help yuh," Morgan said.

"Yuh willin' to keep sidin' me, son? It'd do me a heap of good to know yuh would take care of Jesse and see that I get a fair trial. I'm thinkin' there might be a lynchin'."

Morgan wrapped his hands around two bars of Clark's cell and leaned against the door. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Marshal Badgette had gone back to his office.

Morgan said, "Must be a mighty powerful reason why folks hate you so, Mr. Clark. If I'm to help you, I better know why."

"Dang the lot of 'em," Clark roared. "More yuh do for some folks, the more they want from yuh. Ever notice anythin' peculiar about this here town, son?"

"It's kind of quiet," Morgan acknowledged.

"Danged right it is. Because me and Matt Turner and Dan Langan keep it thataway. Between us we own enough of the town to run it. Ain't no crooked gamblin' houses here. No cheap saloons where they sell red-eye for good whisky. Man goes in business here, he goes honest. Ain't been a shootin' here in two years. Ain't been a holdup in three. Man can ride into town, leave his bedroll and saddle-bags on any steps and they'll be there when he comes for 'em."

Morgan carefully rolled a cigarette. "I'm thinkin' the people might like to be cheated by gamblers and pay good gold for rotten whisky. Yuh can't change people, Mr. Clark."

"We changed 'em," Clark declared. "And this is the best town in the whole territory for it. Women-folk like to settle here because they know their men ain't comin' home over a saddle. Elkhorn's growed faster'n the towns where yuh tote a six-gun because every other man totes one. Where a cowhand works all month and gets cheated out of his pay in two hours."

MORGAN nodded and spoke slowly. He said, "All this talk ain't gettin' yuh out of here. I ain't aimin' to work for a boss who stays locked up. Ain't there anybody in town to help yuh? What about Judge Turner?"

"That skunk wants me to hang. Says I ain't got no right to take ranches away from them that can't pay me. But I do and he signs the papers because that's the law. Some day I'm goin' to draw on him. Mark me, son, it's goin' to be him or me and danged soon."

"What about Dan Langan then?" Morgan asked.

"Langan and me been pards for years. Figgered he'd come here soon's he heard the news, but ain't no sign of him yet. Maybe yuh better go down and tell him I'd be mighty grateful if he came to see me."

"You've hired yourself a hand," Morgan said. "I'm takin' your orders. Langan will be here if I have to rope him. I'll be stayin' at your house. Don't worry none about this niece of yours. Ain't nothin' goin' to happen to her."

"If it does and I get outa here, Morgan, you'd best start ridin' hard and far. You help me and there ain't nothin' I won't do for yuh. I play 'em straight. I like 'em played to me that way.

Morgan nodded, stamped on his cigarette butt and walked leisurely out. He waved to Badgete, who went to lock the main door again. On the street, Morgan decided to walk to Langan's office. He stepped briskly along the wooden walk, left it and took to the street.

He studied the stores, the gambling halls and the saloons with more interest than before. He saw that Clark had spoken the truth. The town of Elkhorn was different. He noticed the women, on their way to market, and they seemed gayer, more contented. And he wondered if this had anything to do with what was happening to Mitch Clark.

The three men who ruled this town had their individual powers to keep folks in line. Clark owned most of the property. Judge Turner still possessed some, but his authority lay in administering the law. Dan Langan kept a large number of cowboys who could keep any number of trouble-makers from changing the peaceful ways of Elkhorn. A combination like these three men wouldn't be beaten.

Of them all, Langan was probably the most powerful, thanks to the number of men who worked for him and would gun for him. Morgan wondered if Langan would lend his influence to the cordially hated Mitch Clark.

CHAPTER VIII

Gunsmoke

PREOCCUPIED and with little thought of any danger on this bright morning, Morgan didn't spot Len Yeary until the burly gunslick all but blocked his way. Yeary still remembered the savage beating he had administered to Morgan. Yeary believed no man who had taken such punishment would ever expose himself to more.

Morgan came to an abrupt stop. His loosely knit frame tightened. The half-smile on his face faded to a dark scowl. For Wayne Morgan hadn't forgotten that night on the canyon rim, either.

"Looks to me," Yeary sneered, "that some hombres don't remember good."

Morgan's right hand moved slowly into a crooked position for a quick draw. He settled the soles and heels of his boots to steady himself. Out of the corner of his eye he saw women running for shelter and men not far behind them.

But in the slanted morning sunlight there was one shadow that didn't move. It was that of a man standing between two buildings where the sun hit him squarely and threw his shadow across the sidewalk. He wore a pair of six-guns and as Morgan watched that shadow he saw the arm move and a gun come out of its holster. Yeary and Slim Davis were up to their old tricks.

Morgan said, "Yeary, yuh got me in a bad position. I know Slim Davis is behind me, ready to shoot me in the back. But I'm bettin' he can't kill me fast enough to save yore rotten skin. You can pull your gun any time. I'm waitin'."

Yeary's wide grin vanished. He crouched half over, hand ready above gun butt. He licked fat lips and his eyes flicked beyond Morgan to the spot where Slim waited.

Morgan fully believed that in a matter

of seconds he would be dead. But a fierce determination surged within him that Len Yeary would die too. And Slim Davis as well, if he could turn fast enough, and retain the strength to shoot a second time.

"You can bide your time until Slim throws lead into me, Yeary," Morgan said. "That still won't save your hide. If yuh got the nerve of a man, yuh'll draw—now!"

Morgan watched Yeary's eyes. A mad way of saving himself had come to the cowboy. When Slim had him lined up in the sights of his Colt, Yeary would show less anxiety. And Yeary wouldn't bother to draw. Why should he, when the man who menaced him would be shot in the back the next second? That might give Morgan time to spin on one heel, throw down on Slim and then rotate back before Yeary overcame his surprise and went for his gun. It was a fool chance, but any chance looked good to Morgan.

Yeary's eyes grew wider. His gun hand relaxed and Morgan knew it was time. He took a quick breath, wondering if it would be his last. He braced himself for the turn or the impact of Slim's bullet. He dug his high heel into the dirt and turned like lightning. As he swept around, Morgan's right hand moved in a blurring flash of speed toward one of his .45s. Before he had the gun in line with the astonished Slim Davis, Morgan fired a shot.

It wasn't meant to hit his enemy, but to distract him and it did. Slim Davis, with a gun in his hand, gave a nervous leap as Morgan's gun flamed. That fraction of a second gave Morgan the chance he needed.

He was still turning, still thumbing the hammer when Davis got his gun in line for a shot. He never fired it. Morgan's second bullet hit Davis just above his nose. He'd seen death coming and greeted it with a scream of terror which was cut off by the impact of the heavy slug.

Davis fell backward, legs and arms folding under him as if they had neither bone nor muscle. His gun hit the dirt and sent up a small cloud of dust. Somewhere down the street a woman screamed. Just once, but it was blood curdling.

Morgan, until now, had no time to think about how he expected to rotate again and shoot Yeary before he started firing. With the first move, Morgan knew how slim his chances were. But Yeary, for some unexplainable reason, wasn't shooting. He stood with both arms high in the air.

TO MORGAN'S left stood Dan Langan, a small pearl-handled gun in his fist. Langan nodded at Morgan and lowered his gun slightly. Yeary took an experimental backward step. When the gun didn't come up, he accepted a long chance. He dropped his arms, turned and started running.

Morgan's gun leveled. Then he lowered it. "Shootin' even a polecat like Yeary in the back don't appeal to me. He can go this time. I'll get to him later. I'm thankin' yuh, Mr. Langan, for sidin' me. I sure needed help."

"I'm glad I came by." Langan put his gun away. "Don't worry about Slim Davis. Ne needed killing bad. I saw it all and so did lots of folks. You got him fair and square."

Morgan grinned tightly. "You better tell the marshal that. He don't like me none."

Marshal Badgette waddled importantly down the street. Men and women were cautiously coming out of the doorways and buildings where they had fled when the shooting became imminent. Langan met Badgette and the fat town peace-officer listened respectfully while Langan told his story.

Badgette walked over to where Slim Davis lay and idly kicked the body. "Reckon Slim been askin' for that a long time. Ornery critter born to die that-away. Guess yuh didn't do our town any damage, Morgan."

"What about Len Yeary?" Morgan asked in a cold voice. "He and Slim were in cahoots."

"I'll take care of Len," Badgette promised. He summoned two men and ordered them to carry Slim Davis' body to the undertaker's down the street. Then he joined Morgan and Langan.

"I was on my way to see Mitch Clark," Langan said. "I don't suppose you have any objections, Marshal?"

"No, no," Badgette answered hastily. "Mitch can see anybody he's a mind to. Just what I told this gent a spell ago."

Langan turned to Morgan. "You went to see Mitch?" Langan said, in surprise.

"Yes. Way I see it, if I hadn't refused

to work for him, he wouldn't be in jail today. So I come back. I'm workin' for Mitch Clark now. He asked me to fetch you, Mr. Langan. I was on my way to your place."

Langan put an arm around Morgan's shoulder. "We'll see Mitch together. I'm grateful that you are here to help him. I doubt he has any other friends in town except you and me. For a man about to be tried for murder, that isn't good, Morgan."

"It's powerful bad. Do you reckon he killed them hombres?"

Langan shook his head. "Mitch never killed anyone. All that temper and irascability of his is just an act. He likes people to think he's tough. But I know Mitch and he's soft. We'll get him out, Morgan, if it's possible to do so.

Morgan pondered that for a few steps. "Way I heard it, this here Judge Turner used to be Mitch Clark's friend, too. If he's to judge the case, I don't suppose there's any doubt that Mitch will get a fair trial."

Langan sighed. "Morgan, you don't know much about Elkhorn. Judge Turner hates Mitch. Oh, don't get me wrong. Turner is an honest man. If Mitch is proven innocent, Turner will free him, but if it's a borderline case so far as the evidence is concerned, I'm afraid—well, Turner will be influenced. He can't help himself. He and Mitch had been on the verge of shooting it out for years."

"Then I reckon we better get Mr. Clark out of that jail awful fast," Morgan opined.

WHEN they had almost reached the jail, Langan pointed at the buckboard rattling down the street toward them. He said, "I know that's Mitch Clark's team and wagon, but who is the girl?"

Morgan squinted a little against the sun. He saw the rig stop and a man descend from it to assist a woman to the ground. "Reckon that is Miss Jesse, Mitch Clark's niece. I heard tell she's mighty pretty, and that sure wasn't any lie, Mr. Langan. I don't know the man with her though."

Jesse Clark was being helped out of the rig by a slim young man dressed in the latest city clothes. He had light brown hair and features that were regular, but he looked as if he'd spent half his life riding the range. He was sturdily built, giving the impression he could hold his own in any kind of a fight.

"Langan said, "I know the boy. That's young Stacy Turner, Judge Turner's son. Been away studying to be a doctor. So the girl is Mitch's niece? I'd hate to be around if Mitch saw them together. Or the Judge. Morgan, for the sake of those two young people I'm going to warn them. Come on."

Stacy Turner shook hands with Langan and seemed very happy to see him. Jesse was introduced and she greeted Langan like an old friend. She looked at Wayne Morgan and saw only another cowboy. She had no idea he was the Masked Rider.

Langan introduced Morgan to both of them. Morgan nodded affably but preferred to listen while they talked. Langan went on.

"Your uncle is in bad trouble, Miss Jesse. But he'll feel worse if he sees you two together."

"We don't care," Jesse said firmly. "That is—if Uncle Mitch wasn't in jail we wouldn't care. I met Stacy in St. Louis. We're going to be married when he graduates, and we're coming here to work. Elkhorn needs a doctor and a nurse."

"When you two are ready," Langan promised, "I'll have an office and a house waiting for you. But right now we've something even more important to think about. Stacy, your father must have passed some remarks about this. What does he seem to think of it?"

"He's got Mitch all but hung," Stacy said disconsolately. "He told me at breakfast that he's going to try Mitch today and hang him tomorrow. He's—he's almost beside himself with rage. Mr. Langan, it can't happen. It mustn't happen."

"We'll do all we can," Langan promised soothingly. "After all, your father, Jesse's uncle and I were partners for years. I ought to be able to do something about bringing them together. Still, murder is a serious offense."

"Uncle Mitch didn't kill that man," Jesse broke in quickly. "I was with him and that man never came to the house. Uncle Mitch and I were together when the rock slide started."

Langan's face lighted up. "Is that the truth? Why, Miss Jesse, you can save him. There's no question about it. But

the trial mustn't start today. I'm sending for a lawyer. A very good lawyer. Right now you'd better go in and try to comfort Mitch."

"Not me." Stacy managed a grin. "He'd tear the place apart if he saw me near Jesse."

"I'll go in," Jesse said. "Stacy, I can drive back alone. I know you have things to do."

Wayne Morgan stepped forward and touched his sombrero. "Ma'am, I reckon it's part of my job to drive that team. Your uncle hired me this mornin'. When you're ready to go back, I'll be waitin'."

Jesse looked earnestly at this tall, dark-haired cowboy. She smiled wanly and Morgan's lips flashed a wide, reassuring smile and Jesse knew she could trust him.

CHAPTER IX

Life at Stake

ON THE following morning the trial of Mitch Clark for murder began. Judge Turner had refused to delay it any longer. It seemed that all other activities in Elkhorn were suspended. No holiday could have brought out more people. The courtroom was jammed by eight o'clock and when Wayne Morgan escorted Jesse Clark inside he had almost to fight his way through the crowds.

Langan, with a somewhat pompous looking man named Pomfret who had been brought in to act as Clark's lawyer, sat at a long table in front of the bench. On a slightly raised platform was the desk which would act as Judge Turner's bench.

Mitch Clark was brought in between Marshal Badgette, who seemed to enjoy the fanfare, and a stalwart deputy who also basked in the limelight. The defendant looked dejected, as if he knew he didn't stand a chance. Wizened, harsh featured Ben Kilrain, the prosecutor, armed with three huge law books, strode importantly to his desk. Someone rapped a gavel and Judge Turner walked in. He sat down, cleared his throat and motioned for all to take their seats.

There was little preamble. A jury was quickly impaneled. Judge Turner read the charge of murder against Mitch Clark. Marshal Badgette testified that he found the body in the canyon. Three citizens testified that they heard Shorty Payson say he was going to visit Mitch Clark the night of the crime. A banker related how, with Shorty's death, Mitch Clark came into a valuable piece of property and that Shorty had been about to pay off his indebtedness.

Langan and Pomfret, the defense attorney, kept whispering to Mitch Clark and he seemed to perk up a bit. Finally the prosecutor rested his case. Mitch's attorney arose, walked to the bench and bowed slightly. He made no impression on Judge Turner. Then he called Jesse Clark to the stand.

She told her story simply and it created a stir in court. Even Judge Turner looked startled. Prosecutor Kilrain held a hasty, whispered consultation with Marshal Badgette who hurried out of the courtroom and vanished somewhere.

Judge Turner said, "Jesse, we all know how you feel about your uncle. Would you lie to save him?"

"Yes!" Jesse said firmly. "But I'm not lying now."

She held to her story in the face of the prosecutor's questioning and when Judge Turner took it up and acted more like the prosecutor than judge, she still stuck to the facts.

Then she stepped down and a large man with a huge mustache and a dusty sombrero was called. Wayne Morgan recognized him instantly as the driver of the stage in which Jesse Clark had ridden and been almost trapped. Marshal Badgette had gone for him.

"Yep," he said, "I don't forget pretty girls. I ain't that old yet."

Judge Turner rapped for silence.

The stage driver went on: "Took this here young lady aboard in Big Rock Creek. She paid her fare to Elkhorn. Right smack in the foothills, we were makin' good time until we ran across a fallen tree. Offhand I'd say it was cut. Anyways, we couldn't get around it. There was no other trail. We camped there for the night."

"Was Jesse Clark with you?" the prosecutor demanded.

"Nope. Miss Jesse she didn't wait none after I told her we'd be there until morn-

in'. She just lit out."

"And now," the prosecutor said importantly, "I want you to remember that a man is on trial for his life and you must answer my question truthfully. Could Miss Jesse have left the spot where the stage was trapped, and reach Mitch Clark's house that same night?"

"Not lessen she had wings," the stage driver answered.

Jesse arose quickly. "I rode. I had a horse."

"Is that the truth?" Judge Turner asked the witness.

"Wasn't no cayuse I saw anythin' of, Judge. Hosses don't grow on trees."

"It was the Masked Rider's horse," Jesse cried. "And he rode with me all the way to Uncle Mitch's house. He was with us when the rock slide began. If you don't believe me, you can ask him. He won't lie. He'll tell you that Uncle Mitch is innocent."

JUDGE TURNER banged for quiet again. There was some difficulty in restoring it, but finally Judge Turner could be heard. He leaned over the desk and looked straight at Jesse.

"This court," he said, "is not rejoicing in sending a man to his doom. But you lied. You said you were with Mitch when the murder happened. But it's been proved you couldn't have been with him. You were too far off to reach him. Now you claim the Masked Rider helped you and he can back up your story."

"He can," Jesse cried. "He can because he was there. This is all some kind of a plot."

Judge Turner brought the gavel down hard. "In the eyes of this court the Masked Rider is an outlaw with a bounty on his head. I'm not saying I'd believe him or not, but—a man like him can't come into court. You are asking us to believe that a ghost backs up your story, Miss Jesse. Because that's what the Masked Rider is. A ghost—so far as this court knows. He can't come in and testify. I'd be bound to have him locked up."

"But you want the truth," Jesse protested. "He isn't a ghost. He's flesh and blood and he's not an outlaw. He wanted to help Uncle Mitch and me. You could grant him free passage. Perhaps he'd hear of it and come into court and back up my story. Otherwise, you'll send Uncle Mitch to the gallows, and he's innocent."

Judge Turner sighed and leaned back in his chair. He looked at Mitch Clark. "If the prisoner has something to say, now is the time for him to say it."

Mitch Clark started to rise, his face white and his eyes wide with rage. Langan quickly pulled him down. Mitch's lawyer approached the bench and went into an impassioned speech. He faced the jury and no man could have given them a better performance. It left some of the spectators wet-eyed, others sniffling. He brought up all the good that Mitch Clark had done for the town. How his money supported so many ranches and farms and businesses. How he'd never killed a man and he hadn't killed Shorty Payson. Elkhorn had never before heard such eloquent pleading.

The jury retired to a storeroom off the court, stayed out ten minutes and came back with a verdict of guilty. Mitch Clark bent his shaggy head in resignation. Langan put an arm around his shoulders. Jesse, sobbing hard, forced her way through the crowd. Stacy Turner tried to intercept her, but she brushed him away.

Wayne Morgan, tight-lipped, heard Mitch Clark sentenced to hang the next day. He watched the elderly man led away by Badgette who seemed to relish his custody of a condemned prisoner. Langan came over and sat down beside Morgan.

"He never had a chance," Langan said. "We might have known that. The lawyer I brought in claims the whole thing was carried out without the slightest regard for the rules of evidence, but he can't do anything. However, Morgan, Mitch isn't going to hang."

Morgan shook his head. "They'll put a strong guard around the jail. You can't shoot up half the town to save his neck. Me, I feel mighty sorry for Jesse. I'm thinkin' I better go take care of her. This ain't goin' to do the feelin's between Jesse and Stacy Turner any good."

"It's a mess all around," Langan admitted. "I'm not through yet. I don't know what I can do, but there must be something. Yes, you take care of Jesse. She'll need someone bad. If she wants for anything let me know."

Morgan overtook the buckboard before it was halfway back to the canyon home of Mitch Clark. He cantered beside the wagon and Jesse seemed glad to have him there, though she said no word through her clenched teeth.

At the house, Morgan unharnessed the team and led them to the stable. When other necessary chores were finished, he went to the house and Jesse had coffee ready. They sat at the kitchen table, both silent, both living under the black mantle of the knowledge that an innocent man was going to die.

JESSE said, "I'm trying very hard not to give way, Mr. Morgan. I want to talk about this thing sensibly. Uncle Mitch did not kill that man. I don't know about the other three who were killed in the canyon. I wasn't here then, but it stands to reason Uncle Mitch didn't kill them, either."

"Don't forget, Miss Jesse," Morgan said softly, "when your uncle was tried for one murder, there wasn't nobody who didn't try him for the other three murders, too. Even Judge Turner couldn't help but think how your uncle had a mighty good reason for killin' them."

Jesse poured more coffee and sat down again. "I'm sorry about the way I treated Stacy. I was taking out my anger at his father on him."

"Don't worry about Stacy," Morgan told her. "It'll take more'n that to drive him off."

"I don't really blame his father," Jesse went on. "I guess if I'd been the judge and heard what was said in that court, I'd have found Uncle Mitch guilty, too. They didn't believe that the Masked Rider brought me here before the rock slide began. And he is my only witness. But what good is a witness who lives behind a mask, has a price on his head and will be shot if he appears and tries to help me?"

Morgan studied her over the rim of his cup. "I'm thinkin'," he said slowly, "that if the Masked Rider brought you here it was so your uncle wouldn't get accused of another killin'. If so, the Masked Rider won't stop now. He's got to come back and help."

"But the only way he can back up my story is by going into court and swearing it's the truth. Then what? They'll shoot him down. Mr. Morgan, don't you understand, this masked man is an outlaw!"

"Yes, ma'am. I reckon everybody knows that, but just the same I'm sayin' he'll be back. Wait and see, Miss Jesse."

"But even if he does risk all that, they won't believe him," Jesse argued. "How can they take the word of a man who remains masked, and I don't see how the mask can be removed."

"I'm a plain cowhand, Miss Jesse. It ain't for me to say one thing or another, but I'm goin' to be one surprised galoot if the Masked Rider don't do somethin'. Rest easy, Miss Jesse. Mitch ain't hung yet."

CHAPTER X

Rider in Black

HURRIEDLY the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk rode up out of the dog-leg hollow in which they had hidden their camp. They climbed the saw-toothed ridge and paused there for a moment while they surveyed the valley basin which led to the approaches of Elkhorn.

"You don't approve of my plan, Blue Hawk," the Masked Rider said. "I can tell by your silence."

Blue Hawk didn't answer for a moment as they resumed riding. Then, while staring straight ahead, he said, "Senor, it is good to face many risks if a man's life is saved, but giving your own life to do this is not good."

"You think they'll set a trap for me, Blue Hawk?"

"You yourself, Senor, have told me that this Judge Turner gave your friend no chance. From the days I have spent in Elkhorn I heard enough to know that both men hate one another. This Judge then, will not be happy if one comes who can clear this man Clark."

"That's wrong, Blue Hawk," the Masked Rider countered. "Judge Turner is ornery enough, but he's honest. He didn't believe Miss Jesse because the stage driver was an honest man too and he swore she couldn't have reached the canyon house before the time of the killin'."

"And he will believe the senor who

comes wearing a mask?" Blue Hawk asked simply.

"I think he will. It's worth trying. Blue Hawk, we're nearing town. I want you to wait for me."

"Blue Hawk will be waiting," the Yaqui said. "If the senor does not return, then Blue Hawk must take steps of his own."

"Good. But give me plenty of time."

"The risk is great, senor."

"Whenever you try to save a man's life the risk is always great," the Masked Rider said. He drew ahead of the Yaqui, raised one hand in a signal of assurance and sent Midnight streaking toward Judge Turner's home near the outskirts of the town.

He left Midnight ground-hitched behind an aspen tree. The Masked Rider, cloak billowing out behind him, ran softly in the direction of the house.

There was lamplight only in one of the front windows, and the masked man made a crouching run for a position just below that window. He raised himself cautiously and had a quick glimpse of Judge Turner, bootless feet propped against another chair, flowing tie off and ornate velvet vest open. He looked more like a tired, worried old man than a judge.

Seated across from him, glumly staring at the wall, was Stacy Turner, his son. It was clear that both men had been arguing, with neither one the victor. While the masked man watched, Stacy reached one hand toward his father in an imploring gesture. Judge Turner growled something and Stacy sighed and gave up.

The Masked Rider skirted the corner of the house, lightly vaulted the low porch rail and came to the door. He tried it, found it unlocked and a moment later he was approaching the parlor where Judge Turner and Stacy were still seated in angry silence.

Judge Turner moved restlessly. "Stacy," he said, "I've done everything a father can do for his son, but I can't let Mitch go. The jury found him guilty."

"You could refuse to accept the verdict," Stacy pointed out. "You could believe Jesse!"

Judge Turner said, "Learning that you and Mitch Clark's niece are going to be married is the worst blow I could receive. It's even worse than if I was forced to leave this town and this job I love so much. You won't be happy with anybody that's got Clark blood in her, son."

"Father," Stacy sighed, "blood has nothing to do with this situation. Mitch Clark is innocent. You know it, deep down, but you're too doggone stubborn to admit it. You hate Mitch because he broke up the partnership with you and Langan. You've let this hatred get the better of your judgment, and that means personal judgment as well as the kind you give in court."

THE judge rose abruptly. "I'm going to bed. Not you nor anybody else can tell me how to run my court. This whippersnapper of a girl lied to save Mitch. And when I caught her in it, she had the gall to say that this desperado, the Masked Rider, can prove she tells the truth. The Masked Rider! She might as well have told me that poor old Shorty Payson had risen from the dead and swore Mitch didn't kill him."

Judge Turner walked toward the door, but he came to a sudden stop. Slowly his hands went above his head. Stacy leaped to his feet and made a mad dash toward a table on which a holstered gun lay.

"You won't need the gun, Stacy," the Masked Rider said. "Judge, you can put your hands down and sit. You, too, Stacy. So you didn't think I'd come to swear that Jesse told the truth. Judge, your son is right. Hatred for Mitch Clark robbed him of a fair trial."

Turner sat down and placed both hands on the arms of the chair. He studied the masked man intently. "Well," he said finally, "I was wrong. You did come. But can you go on the witness stand and face the prosecutor?"

The masked man moved his head from side to side. "First question would be what was my name. Judge, I'm not tellin' that. But folks know I'm not a liar."

"Folks know there's a big reward on your scalp," Turner said harshly. "You show yourself, and Marshal Badgette will make a play at shooting you down. The reward goes, dead or alive."

"I know that," the Masked Rider said. "But I can prove my story is the truth. Someone meant to stop the stage and kill Jesse. I'll grant that whoever it was didn't know Jesse was a girl. Lots of men have that name, too. But I found out

about it and chased the killers away. Let me round 'em up and I'll make them talk."

"The jury has rendered its verdict," Turner reminded him.

"The verdict can be changed. They haven't heard all the truth. But finding those men and proving my story will take time. Mitch Clark hangs in the morning. You must grant him a postponement."

"I'll grant nothing," Judge Turner cried. "He's guilty. He knows it, you know it, and the whole town knows it. He killed three other men, too. He's getting no other chance to do murder from me. Nossiree! The sentence stands."

The Masked Rider said, "Suppose, after Mitch Clark is hung, we found out he was innocent. You can't bring a dead man back, Judge. You must not make a mistake when it comes to killing a man."

Stacy Turner stepped forward. "Father, this man is right. I don't care if he does wear a mask. I've heard about him. Clear to St. Louis, there's talk about the good he does and nobody who's actually met him ever says he's done anything bad. I don't think he's an outlaw. Not for anything he did himself. I think the jury would believe him."

"How can I have him testify?" Judge Turner argued. "It'll have to be in regular court. Marshal Badgette will be there and when he sees the Masked Rider he'll gun him down—or force the Masked Rider to use his Colts."

"Not if you only summon the jury and the prosecutor," Stacy said eagerly. "You don't need anyone else to make it legal. That way the responsibility won't be all on your head. If the jury says no and Mitch hangs, then it's their fault, too. You've got to give this man a chance."

Judge Turner rubbed his chin, paced the floor and finally came to a stop facing the Masked Rider. "In two hours," he said, "I'll open court. Stacy, you root out the jury and the defendant. I'll get the prosecutor. Keep it all quiet. I'm giving you my word, Masked Rider, that you won't be taken. That's all I can do."

The Masked Rider stepped back and holstered his gun. "I'm asking for no more, Judge."

He walked swiftly to the door and disappeared into the night.

Judge Turner mopped his face. "Stacy," he said, "that man would make a good lawyer. Wasn't anything in the world could have changed my mind except to be told that if Mitch dies an innocent man, I'd be to blame. I don't want blame like that. You go fetch the jury and the prisoner. It's going to take some explaining on my part to make the ornery prosecutor see things my way."

Stacy seized his hat, headed for the door and then stopped. He turned slowly. "Father, suppose the prosecutor decides to arrest the Masked Rider?"

Judge Turner gave a snort. "We'd be needing a new prosecutor, son. I got a feeling that masked man don't tolerate being arrested none at all."

CHAPTER XI

The Trap

IT WAS nearly midnight when Judge Turner entered the courtroom and began lighting the lamps. In a few moments two jurors arrived, then several others followed, and finally came the prosecutor. He was still unconvinced that this was the best thing, but Judge Turner had used some stern persuasion. The rest of the jurors finally joined the group.

It was a strange courtroom scene. The benches and chairs for townspeople were empty. The jury box was full of sleepy jurors. Ben Kilrain sat at his desk. The clerk was present and ready. So was the prisoner, Mitch Clark. Judge Turner was on the bench, gazing at his thick watch. In five minutes the Masked Rider was due to appear.

Outside they heard the hammer of hoofs. Then someone pushed open the door. It was Dan Langan who entered, accompanied by the rather pompous defense attorney.

Langan said, "Well, I see you finally came to your senses, judge. Stacy told me what happened. I'm beginning to renew my faith in you and your brand of justice."

The judge leaned across the bench. "Dan," he said, "there's only one thing drives me to this. The fact that I couldn't stand an innocent man's blood on my hands. Now sit down. We've got a few

minutes to wait."

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk sat like two frozen statues on their horses. The Masked Rider saw the lights go on in the courtroom. He watched the jurors arrive, then Judge Turner with the prosecutor and finally Langan and the defense attorney.

The Masked Rider dropped hands to the butts of his guns and slid them in and out of their holsters a few times. He was in a predicament from which there seemed to be no escape. If he didn't risk going into the court and testifying, Mitch Clark would be dead soon after dawn. If he did enter the courtroom and found himself in a trap, Mitch Clark would probably die anyway and have company at the gallows.

Turning toward Blue Hawk, the Masked Rider saw the Yaqui's set face and sensed the Indian's alarm. He said, "Blue Hawk, you still do not approve?"

"How can one approve, senor, a plan which can so easily become a trap? Yet you cannot let an innocent man die without trying to save him. You will go. Blue Hawk will do whatever he can."

"I knew you'd see it that way, Blue Hawk. If anything happens, it's up to you. It's time now. Wish me luck and—*adios.*"

Once the Masked Rider turned in the saddle to look back. The Yaqui was motionless, his gray pony immobile. A few moments later the masked horseman looked back again. The horizon was empty. Pony and Indian had vanished.

The Masked Rider almost felt the electric thrill of a warning that told him to be careful. He dismounted a quarter of a mile from the courthouse and approached it on foot, leading the stallion. He didn't go down the main street, but made his way through yards and between buildings. He took a long breath and walked toward the entrance to the courtroom.

Almost at once a rifle was fired. A voice called, "Masked Rider, there are guns on all sides of you. Elevate or yuh'll git yoreself drilled twenty times."

From all about him carefully hidden men now came into view. All held guns ready to fire. If the Masked Rider so much as dropped a hand toward a holster, he'd be blasted from all directions. He raised his left arm high. With his right hand he slapped the stallion across one shoulder.

"Go, Midnight!" he said softly. "Go!"

The stallion kicked up his heels, whinnied, and shot away like a thunderbolt. Someone fired at the animal, missed by a mile, and then Marshal Badgette's voice shouted orders not to shoot the horse.

"We got the Masked Rider," Badgette exulted. "Ain't that enough? Close in on him, boys. Easy now—the man's as dangerous as a snake. If he moves, shoot."

His fat face gleaming with sweat of anxiety, the marshal came in closer. He had his gun level. Behind him crowded half a dozen men and from all sides similar groups were approaching. All had a wholesome regard for the Masked Rider's reputation and prowess with a six-gun.

BADGETTE went behind the masked man, reached around and unbuckled his gun belts. Then he searched him. This done, he stepped back and emitted a loud, raucous laugh.

"They told me the Masked Rider would be hard to ketch and he'd mebbe die afore he let any peace officer put a gun to him. Yuh see, boys, all them stories didn't mean a thing to me. I jest done my duty!"

"Would you care to tell your men not to interfere?" the Masked Rider asked gently. "Then let me put my hands down. You can keep your guns, Marshal. All I want is two fists."

Badgette growled an oath. "I ain't takin' chances with no important prisoner like you, Masked Rider. We're havin' a hangin' in the mornin' and I got me an idee Mitch Clark ain't goin' to be lonesome when he's dancin' at the end o' that rope."

"Who told you I was coming?" the Masked Rider asked.

Badgette looked very wise. "Wasn't nobody told me nothin'. I just used my brains. I figgered the Masked Rider might take a chance and come here."

Badgette," someone said sharply, "yuh got yore man. Stop tantalizin' him. I ain't so sure but what we made a mistake helpin' yuh."

"You made no mistake," Badgette roared. "Now I'm marchin' him into that courtroom. Start walkin', Masked Rider, and remember I'm six feet behind yuh with a cocked gun. Git!"

The courtroom doors were wide open

by the time the Masked Rider reached them. He walked on into the courtroom. Judge Turner jumped to his feet, looking surprised. The Masked Rider's lips were grim, his eyes brooding and cold.

Judge Turner's voice was strained to the point of almost cracking. "Badgette, how did you know the Masked Rider was attending this night court?"

"I got him," Badgette growled. "He's a outlaw. Must be fifteen notices in my office says he's wanted. I'm marshal of Elkhorn, and it's my bounden duty to arrest outlaws. Now I'm sayin' we'll take the mask off him and see who he is."

The Masked Rider's shoulders went back. "The man who removes this mask," he said, "has to kill me first and stand ready to die himself. The only time I'll be unmasked is when I'm dead."

Judge Turner came down off the bench. "I made a deal with the Masked Rider," he said earnestly. "There was to be no trap. But you took him and I can't do anything about it. I got no authority to order him freed. And since all this has happened, I don't see how I can let him testify either. I got to study the law on that end and get some advice.

"What about the mask?" Badgette asked. "Yuh ain't lettin' him keep that mask on?"

"I am," Turner snapped. "Until I know the law on this and I know what charges there are against this man, we ain't removing that mask. By morning we'll have all the facts we need. Lock him up, Marshal, but if he is harmed, the man who harms him will answer to me."

From the rear of the crowd a voice cried out, "What'll you do if we string this masked man up, Judge? What can you do?"

Judge Turner said, "We're using a rope on Mitch Clark in the morning. That's enough hanging. I gave this masked man my word. I couldn't keep it but, by Jehosaphat, I'm seeing that nothing else is done to him."

The word rope brought a wave of whispering from some of the crowd. Marshal Badgette wetted his lips. He stepped close to the Masked Rider.

"Yuh hear that? They're settin' to let yuh dangle from some tree. We're leavin' by the back door, but if yuh make a break for it, Masked Rider, I'm bringin' yuh down an' then neither one of us will care what the boys do with a rope."

The Masked Rider nodded in agreement. He let Badgette herd him to the rear of the courtroom. The marshal sent for four deputies and warned them what he meant to do. Then they rushed for the rear door.

TEN minutes later the Masked Rider was pushed into a cell and the door clanged shut in his face. He still wore the mask. At least, that much had been left to him, but he knew that unless something happened, very soon, being unmasked wouldn't make much difference.

Only one thing buoyed him up. As he was shoved and pushed toward the jail, he saw a blanketed Indian shuffle silently off into the night. Blue Hawk hadn't waited beyond the town limits.

Badgette holstered his gun for the first time since he'd made the most important arrest in his life. He stepped back, stared at his masked prisoner and smacked his

[*Turn page*]

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lips as if he'd just eaten an extra good steak.

"I guess this is the end of yore trail, Masked Rider. Hombres like you ought to know that some day they'll meet a man who don't turn yeller. Now I'm sendin' all them notices about yuh to Judge Turner. He'll make up his mind about you real quick."

"Where is Mitch Clark?" the Masked Rider asked.

Badgette pointed down the cellroom corridor. "We got a special cell for them that gets the rope. Yuh can talk to him if yuh holler loud enough. But remember this. I ain't leavin' that chair right outside the main cell door. All I got to do is turn my head and I can see yuh. Nobody ever busted outa this jail, and no masked man is goin' to be the first to do it."

Badgette walked away with a newfound swagger. He was mentally counting the cash rewards he'd get for this capture. He pushed his desk over so that he could sit behind it and still face the main cell door and the door of the Masked Rider's cell just beyond it. He began searching for the notices on this outlaw and his crafty little brain was beginning to visualize what fame he'd get from all this. He could almost see the gallows with the masked man standing beneath the rope. All of Elkhorn would be there and stand breathless while Badgette dramatically pulled away the mask to reveal the Masked Rider for whoever he really was. Nobody in Elkhorn would ever forget that day—or Marshal Badgette.

The Masked Rider stood gripping the cell bars. He'd never felt quite so helpless nor quite as worried. For he knew who had started that talk of a rope for the masked man. It had long been Len Yeary, lurking on the outskirts of the crowd, but egging them on to a lynching party. Yeary, if he was hired by the mysterious influences behind this scheme, would have money enough to liquor up the crowd. Especially those who were fools enough to belive that a rope solves all problems.

The Masked Rider's thoughts were suddenly interrupted. A voice that sounded far away, called his name. It was Mitch Clark's voice and the Masked Rider called back.

Mitch Clark said, "Never figgered you fer such a fool, Masked Rider. Yuh mighta guessed you'd be taken. Turner ain't lettin' me get out from under that rope no matter what he has to do. Yuh seen Jesse?

"No," the Masked Rider answered. "There was no time for that. I came here under an agreement with Judge Turner that I could testify in your favor. If the jury accepted my story it was all right with Turner."

"And he doublecrossed yuh?" Mitch shouted. "Shore he did. That's just like that sidewinder. You get outa this, Masked Rider, yuh'll have to gun him down. Yuh can't trust a snake after he's struck once."

"Let's not worry about me," the Masked Rider called. "It's only a few hours to dawn. I hope to get you out of here."

"I'm hopin' for nothin'," Clark said. "I stopped hopin' hours ago. All I been doin' is a lot o' thinkin'. I'm proud o' my life. Real proud. I helped to start this town and build it up. Judge Turner, Dan Langan and me, we put down the roots and watched it grow. We kept it clean. Never figgered it would grow so big and be bound to grow even bigger. Like it's goin' to do, Masked Rider. Ain't nothin' can stop Elkhorn now."

"It's a good town, Mitch. I've never seen one so peaceable."

"Want to know why? Because Turner and Langan and me, we made a deal that Elkhorn wouldn't be just another frontier town. No, sir, we figgered on makin' it attractive so people would come and settle here. We rode crooked gamblers out of town. We didn't allow for no cheap red eye to be sold. We fixed it so every man worked and was glad to work. That's why Elkhorn has growed so fast. Folks like a town like that."

"What will happen if they hang you in the morning?" the Masked Rider asked.

"Nothin'. Dan Langan and Judge Turner won't let anythin' change. Shore, me and the judge been feudin' for years. Both of us are ornery cusses and we talk a good fight. But down under that mean hide of his, Judge Turner is like Dan Langan and me. He's for Elkhorn, and he'll die to keep it a clean town."

"You know what, Mitch?" the Masked Rider called out. "I'm thinking all three of you will keep running Elkhorn. I'm saying you won't hang in the morning."

Marshal Badgette sat bold upright. Then he arose and went to a cabinet. He took down a shotgun, carried it to his desk and opened the breech. He put in two shells, snapped the breech back and cocked both barrels. Then he laid the gun across his desk.

"I'm warnin' yuh, Masked Rider, if yuh try any kind o' tricks, I'm lettin' go with both barrels," he called uneasily.

The Masked Rider's set features remained frozen for he saw no present hope. A man locked up and unarmed is helpless. And Badgette was the type to open fire at the slightest suspicion. Besides that, the Masked Rider knew that Len Yeary was shrilling his murder song into the ears of the men who drank his liquor.

Then the Masked Rider's lips curled upward and the eyes that shone through the slits in the domino mask, sparkled again. As from a great distance came the cry of a mountain lion.

Marshal Badgette heard it, too, and shuddered. He said, "Gettin' so them critters grow bolder and bolder. Have to organize a party and go hunt 'em down."

CHAPTER XII

Jail Break

BLUE HAWK, riding his gray, had Midnight and a pinto trotting behind him. He left all three horses near the outskirts of town, tying up the pinto and the gray but leaving Midnight only ground-hitched.

The Yaqui made no more sound than his shadow flitting across the buildings between which he worked his way toward the jail. He reached the street and heard the first mutterings of the mob. Blue Hawk slowly wetted his lips as he saw the crowd jamming the street and moving along it.

While the men were too far away to be recognized, Blue Hawk knew the strident voice of Yeary who apparently led the pack. Blue Hawk smiled grimly. These men, intent upon lynching Mitch Clark and the Masked Rider, might become useful in freeing the men they wanted to hang.

Blue Hawk moved faster now. He spotted the guards around the jail. Four of them, rifle-armed and posted so as to cover all approaches. When Blue Hawk saw them first, they were lazily occupying their posts, smoking cigarettes and seemed certain their prisoners had no chance for escape.

Then the angry roar of the mob reached them and they sprang to attention. Marshal Badgette strode onto the porch and gave sharp orders.

"Talk to 'em," he said. "Make 'em listen to yuh. They got to be stopped.

The four men left their ponies tied up before the jail, formed a line and advanced toward the mob. Their guns were held ready but they knew, and the mob would know, that the guns would never be used. These men sympathized with the mob. They had no interest in risking their lives to protect a condemned murderer and a masked outlaw.

Someone in the crowd yelled a warning, but the four guards didn't stop their advance. Then one of the leaders called out a command to attack. The crowd bore down on the four men who promptly threw away their rifles but were swallowed up by the bloodthirsty crowd.

Blue Hawk knew he could wait no longer. Sprinting, he turned the corner of the jail house. He cocked his rifle while on the run and burst into Marshal Badgette's office.

Badgette, peering out of a window at the oncoming crowd, had been smiling a bit smugly. Now, if Clark and the Masked Rider were taken out and hanged, nobody could say he hadn't done his best to stop the lynching.

At the sound of the door being opened, Badgette spun around. He saw the Indian and for a second or two discounted the steady warning in Blue Hawk's eyes. Badgette went for the shotgun placed on the desk within reach.

The rifle swung to follow him and Badgette checked himself just short of grabbing the shotgun. He'd seen the whiteness of the Indian's trigger finger.

"Move to cell door!" Blue Hawk ordered. He gave one quick glance out of the window and saw that the crowd was still stopped. Seconds were precious now.

Under the prodding of the gun, the marshal unlocked the main cell door. Blue Hawk forced him into one of the empty

cells and slammed the door on him. He turned the key quickly, withdrew it and hurried to the cell where the Masked Rider was waiting.

A moment later they both had freed Mitch Clark. Led by Blue Hawk, the trio moved into the office, paying no attention to the marshal's mixture of threats and wails.

"They are in a dangerous mood," Blue Hawk said. "We must take the horses of the guards and ride to where I have left Midnight and the others. If we leave the horses of the guards, they will be used to follow us. Without them, a posse will take a few minutes to form."

"You're right, as usual," the Masked Rider agreed. "Mr. Clark, we can't avoid being shot at. All we can hope is that the men will be either too drunk or too excited to shoot well. Blue Hawk, you go first."

Blue Hawk hesitated. In his mind was the thought that the Masked Rider should be the first to go and probably escape before he was noticed riding away. But Blue Hawk never questioned his orders. He opened the door, stepped through and walked down the steps. Be running, he would have attracted attention. He reached the four horses, slipped between two of them and quickly went to work untying all four.

IN THE marshal's office, the Masked Rider nudged Mitch Clark. "You next. Ride fast and keep low in the saddle."

Clark tried to imitate Blue Hawk's casual escape, but Clark was too well known. Someone called his name. The fighting, brawling mob turned as one man. With wild shouts they charged down the street.

The Masked Rider leaped off the porch and streaked toward the horses. Blue Hawk slapped one of them hard across the flank and sent him galloping away. Blue Hawk swung into the saddle of another and was holding the other two for Clark and the Masked Rider.

In a moment they were all riding fast. But guns were beginning to crack behind them. The mob, seeing itself robbed of both victims was trying to remedy the situation by bullets.

Mitch Clark gave a low moan and slumped sideways in his saddle. Instantly Blue Hawk pulled up his horse, turned and raced back. The masked outlaw was already riding beside Clark. The guns were still banging and Clark gave a crazy lurch as a second bullet hit him low in the back.

The Masked Rider seized Clark's horse and kept it going at full speed. On the other side, Blue Hawk rode close enough to keep Mitch Clark from falling out of his saddle. This close riding made them good targets, but neither Blue Hawk nor the masked outlaw gave that a thought.

By the time organized pursuit was taking shape back in town, the trio had already reached the spot where Blue Hawk had left the three fresh mounts. They helped Clark out of the saddle. He leaned weakly on them.

"Got me—twice. Reckon it don't look good for me. I'm a old man and yuh can't fight slugs less you got a doctor or a lot of young blood."

"You'll make it," the Masked Rider assured him. "We're not done yet."

"No matter." Clark forced a grin. "I'd a sight rather die by bein' shot than with a rope around my neck. Just leave me here. I'll be all right, and all I do is slow yuh up."

Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider scoffed at the idea, got Clark into the saddle of the pinto and roped him there so that if he lost too much blood, he wouldn't fall. Blue Hawk swung onto his gray, rode back a bit and called out that pursuit was coming up fast. The Masked Rider sent Midnight racing north.

Once they had outdistanced their pursuers, Blue Hawk took the lead and brought them over trails which were either all rock or earth packed so hard that no trace of their passing remained.

Mitch Clark lolled weakly in his saddle, but he was still conscious. The Masked Rider signaled Blue Hawk to catch up with him. They rode side by side, speaking softly so that Clark wouldn't hear them .

"He is very bad, senor," Blue Hawk said. "It is not well that he rides much further. There is the box canyon. Our camp there has not been found. Perhaps we can find the bullets and keep the wounds clean."

"We've got to," the Masked Rider said grimly. "But we can get help. The kind we need. Head for the box canyon. Blue

Hawk, what is it?"

The Yaqui had his chin raised high, his nostrils were flared out, his whole body frozen. Finally he raised one hand and pointed east, over the rimrock.

"Smoke, senor, and the glow of a fire against the clouds."

"Take care of Clark," the Masked Rider called over his shoulder. As Blue Hawk finished telling about the fire, the masked outlaw was already riding.

He topped the ridge and when he saw the flames, he knew it was the ranch of a man called Slocum. The Masked Rider always made it a point to study the ranch country around the towns in which he worked. The fire had progressed so far that he realized it was useless to ride down there in the hope of saving anything.

He sat erect in the saddle, watching the dying flames. Blue Hawk and Clark reached his side. Clark was still conscious but getting weaker. He raised his head and gazed at the burning ranch for a moment.

"Slocum's place," he croaked. "That's Slocum's ranch. I was getting' ready to foreclose on here. It's them owl-hooters again, and I'll get blamed like before."

The Masked Rider gave Blue Hawk quiet instructions to take Clark to the box canyon camp. Then he rode out into the night toward the fire. Within a few hundred feet of it he heard the beat of hoofs and two riders were suddenly silhouetted against the fire. They where galloping like Indians around a wagon train, shooting yelling. Now and then a six-gun went off, its muzzle pointed toward the sky.

THE Masked Rider drew a gun as he pounded closer. Then he was seen and the next gunfire wasn't aimed at the sky. The Masked Rider's Colts bucked twice. The pair who had started out to intercept him, wheeled their horses and streaked around to the other side of the burning ranch.

The Masked Rider had no idea how many were in the gang, but if he was in the habit of trying to estimate his enemies, he would have forgotten to now. He could see two figures lying dangerously close to the burning building. One was a man, the other a woman. The woman raised one arm as if in supplication.

The Masked Rider twisted in his saddle, looked behind him at the dark hills and swept one arm around in a gesture that seemed to order a small army of men to ride down on the ranch.

He was seen, for almost at once three men burst from behind the fire and started riding fast. The Masked Rider could hear the hiss of their quirts.

Two more were apparently commanded to form a rear guard. They were heading toward the Masked Rider now, guns held ready. They were excellent targets against the glow of the fire. The Masked Rider spoke gently to Midnight and the black stallion stretched his supple body into a full charging attack.

One of the men opened fire. The Masked Rider's gun flamed. The man who had started the firing gave a scream, sagged limply and then fell out of the saddle. The second man fired once, wheeled his horse and disappeared into the darkness:

The Masked Rider kept going until he reached the two people close by the building. He leaped from his horse, ran into the heat and pulled the woman away to safety. Then he went back after the man. Both were alive, though the man seemed to be badly hurt with at least one bullet wound through his side.

The Masked Rider fetched a bucket of water, gave them some and then did his best to stop the flow of blood from the man's bullet wound. The woman was sitting up, dazed, frightened and still groggy. She gave a half scream when she saw the masked face.

The outlaw turned quickly toward her. "I'm the Masked Rider," he said. "There's nothing to fear. This man is badly hurt, but there are horses in the corral. I'll help you get him into a saddle and you can take him to town. It's quicker that way."

"Thank heaven you came," the woman sobbed in relief. "They burned us out. They killed Joe. He's my husband. I know they killed him. That man Mitch Clark will never be satisfied until he owns the whole state. And he'll kill and keep killing to get this property."

"Mitch Clark?" the Masked Rider frowned. "Was he here?"

"No," she replied, dispelling the Masked Rider's vague suspicion that Clark might be impersonated. "But those were his

men. Roughnecks. They told us that if Mitch Clark was hanged, they'd burn every ranch that owed him money."

"Those were not Mitch Clark's men, Mrs. Slocum. Now let me help you get started. Your husband needs medical attention bad."

The Masked Rider watched her ride into the darkness, leading the horse on which her husband was tied. The Masked Rider walked toward Midnight and was about to mount when he heard a groan. It came from the man he'd shot.

The Masked Rider went over to his side and raised him a bit. The man was dying fast and he was on the verge of coma. He was trying to talk, apparently in an effort to plead with someone. At first the Masked Rider could only distinguish an odd word or two, but after a little while the dying man's voice became stronger.

"Promise—yuh got to promise—don't throw me down the canyon. Don't let them rocks—chew me up. Like they chewed up Frank and Nick and Cheyenne."

The Masked Rider exhaled sharply. "Who threw them down the canyon? Tell me who did it and I promise you'll be buried proper."

"We—we all did. Big fight—shot each other up. We got rid of them one by one."

"Who told you to do it?" the masked man demanded. "Who did you ride for?"

The dying man's lips moved, but no words came. Then blood welled up, ran down the corners of his mouth and he was dead. The Masked Rider gently lowered the body to the ground and sat there for a few moments while new and fresh ideas began to take shape in his mind.

He galloped away from the scene of fire and death, heading for the box canyon. With every beat of Midnight's hoofs, his brain turned over plans.

It was dawn when the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk returned to the burned-out ranch and there picked up the sign of the four men who had ridden away the night before.

BLUE HAWK followed that trail easily until they came to rocky country followed by a dry river bed on which only faint marks of hoofs could be found. It took almost the entire morning before they topped a ridge and looked down upon a sprawling ranch.

Blue Hawk said, "The trail leads there, senor."

"Yes, I reckoned it would," the masked man said slowly. "Dan Langan owns that ranch, Hawk. Those raiders work for him. He's got honest men down there too, but these owl-hooters make themselves scarce when there are any visitors."

"Langan is the man who wanted Clark hung, then?" Blue Hawk asked.

"Yep, though I got no idea why. So we'll just keep Clark hidden. Jesse is a nurse and can take care of him. Judge Turner's boy showed us he was a good doctor when he took out the slugs. Let them think Mitch Clark is dead and see what they'll do about that. The next move is theirs, Hawk."

"*Si*," the Yaqui said stolidly. "But then the last move is ours."

CHAPTER XIII

Return of the Dead

NOON was approaching. It was the morning after the escape from jail. Marshal Badgette and his posse had returned empty-handed after dawn. There wasn't a sign to be read which pointed to the direction taken by the Masked Rider and his wounded companion. Men who had been with Len Yeary's lynching party the night before were sober now and wondering how they ever got into such a mess. There wasn't one of them, save Yeary, who wasn't happy about Mitch Clark's escape.

Judge Turner was alone at home when Stacy returned. The judge eyed him half belligerently. "You sure made yourself scarce. What were you doing—comforting the niece of this murderer who shot his way out of jail?"

"There's wasn't a shot fired by Mitch and you know it," Stacy answered hotly. "If they hadn't escaped, the mob would have lynched him. Then what would you say about your precious justice? Yes, I was with Jesse. She needed someone."

"What about that cowhand Mitch hired? Ain't he company enough for her?"

"Jesse needs someone who loves her,

Dad. Oh, what's the use? You don't even try to understand."

Judge Turner spoke solemnly. "Son, maybe I do understand. Been thinking it over. You can't blame Jesse for what her uncle is. I won't stand in your way if you want to marry her. But, never forget that by escaping, Mitch Clark has confessed his guilt. Innocent men don't run away."

Stacy turned on his heel and walked away. A few seconds later he was back and very excited. "Father, look out of the window. It's Mitch's buckboard. Jesse is sitting beside that waddy, Wayne Morgan, while he drives the team. There's—there's someone in back. Covered up. It's a corpse."

Judge Turner emitted a gasp of horror and ran out of the house, for the first time in his career forgetting judicial dignity. He ran up and waved both hands at the buckboard. Morgan stopped the team.

Judge Turner asked, "Who is it—in back there? Who died?"

Jesse bit her lower lip. She was red-eyed from weeping. Her voice was just a whisper, but Judge Turner heard it.

"It's Uncle Mitch. He is dead. They shot him last night. The Masked Rider did what he could, but it wasn't enough. Uncle Mitch is dead and you killed him. You gave him no chance; you wouldn't believe me. You trapped the Masked Rider after giving him your word that you wouldn't. You—you called Uncle Mitch a murderer, but you could never prove he was. But I can prove that you are. Mr. Morgan, please drive on."

The buckboard pulled away. Judge Turner, ashen-faced, stood there watching it proceed down the street and stop in front of Al Bagley's Funeral Parlor.

Judge Turner lowered his head and walked slowly back to his home. When Stacy returned an hour later, Judge Turner hadn't moved from his rocker near the window.

Stacy said, "They're going to bury him right away. Jesse won't let anybody see him. She says everyone here hated him while he lived and they can keep on hating him for all she cares. Father, she blames you."

"How did it happen, son?"

"In the back. Two bullet holes. Guess he didn't live long after the Masked Rider carried him away."

Judge Turner covered his eyes and Stacy retreated softly. Later that day, near sunset, Judge Turner drove his team out to the cemetery. He walked to the newly dug grave and stood there looking down at the simple wooden cross.

When he turned away he had become an old, old man. Dan Langan and Stacy were at the house when he returned. Judge Turner refused a drink or food.

He said, "Dan, I was wrong about Mitch. Dead wrong. Not about his having killed Shorty Payson. I think he did. Mitch is dead and he deserved to die, but now that he's gone I can see that we drove him to it. Or I did. You never showed him any hate."

"Why should I?" Langan asked. "We got along when we were young and tough. I was in the middle of the foolish feud between the two of you. But now Mitch is dead. Through no fault of yours. He'd have been lynched if he hadn't tried to run and got himself shot. Your conscience should be clear."

"I won't forget him, Dan," Judge Turner said. "I wish I could have told him, before he died, that we were both just a couple of hotheads. But I guess it wasn't meant to be."

LANGAN twirled his hat and looked down at the floor. "I'm thinking that Jesse won't want to stay here now. Suppose you and I buy out the property which Mitch must have left to her. I'll handle it as if I was alone in the deal, but afterwards you can settle up and take your share. Reckon that's the least we can do for Mitch's memory."

"You handle it," Judge Turner said. "Anything you say, Dan. I'm all through arguing. All through. I want peace and quiet—a place to think. I'm going to my office at the courthouse."

He pulled on his hat, passed up the gunbelt draped over a chair and slowly walked out of the house. Dan Langan and Stacy watched him as he proceeded down the street, heedless of people, preoccupied with the knowledge that what he had done had sent a friend to his death.

Judge Turner pushed open the big door to the courtroom, walked down the center

aisle between the rows of benches. He glanced without much interest at a man who sat huddled at the far corner of the front bench. Judge Turner kept going. He passed beneath his desk on the rostrum and was close by the door to his office when he heard boots scrape on the floor.

The man who had been dozing in the front bench, called out, "Judge! Judge Turner."

The judge looked over his shoulder. His eyes widened, his mouth opened and he stood paralyzed in horror for a full minute. The man was walking toward him slowly, hat in his hands.

"Bode!" Judge Turner exclaimed. "Pete Bode!"

"Yep, that's me, judge. Rode all night to get here, but I guess it's too late."

"You—you're supposed to be dead," Judge Turner cried. "Everyone says Mitch Clark killed you and threw you off the canyon rim."

Pete Bode was skinny, unkempt and bleary-eyed, but he managed a wide grin. "Simon Miller and Randy Fraser ain't dead neither. We owed Mitch Clark money and figgered it we went prospectin', we might make a strike and be able to pay him off."

"If all three of you are alive, whose bodies were found in the rock slide?" Turner exclaimed. "They were identified because they wore clothes and had guns and papers belonging to all three of you."

"I'm comin' to that, Judge," Bode said with a smirk. "Yuh see, I rode off first. Rode right into an outlaw camp. They took my money and when I told them Miller and Fraser were comin' too, they just kept me there. Miller came next day and they took him too. Then Randy Fraser. They swiped everythin' we had, gave us some old clothes and some food and water. We just drifted on, took a job at a ranch and made enough to reach a likely spot for prospectin'."

Judge Turner covered his eyes with one gnarled hand. "Everyone, even I, believed Clark had murdered the three of you. When Shorty was found in the canyon we never even stopped to figure things out. Just said Clark had killed his fourth man. And all the while you three were alive!"

"We sure would have come quick if we'd knowed about it," Bode explained. "Heard tell of how we were all dead only a couple of days ago. That's why I came back. Judge, yuh want I should sort of hide here and slip away when it gets dark? Nobody saw me ride in."

Judge Turner's worried look became one of fierce anger. "No! I want you to go to Marshal Badgette and tell him your story. Then I want you to send for Miller and Fraser. I'm not going to hide or try to cover this up."

"Why sure, Judge," Bode nodded. "I'll go see Badgette right now. Don't want folks thinkin' I'm dead."

Late the following day, after the hearing had been held, Bode walked out of the courtroom. Turner entered his office, sat down and tried to find some peace in the thought that Mitch Clark had never been tried for the murder of Bode, Miller or Fraser. He had been convicted of killing Shorty Payson and the evidence pointing to his guilt was good.

Turner knew it was of no use. He, the jury, the whole town, had based their conviction of Clark on the fact that he was a three-time killer before Payson died. They were all guilty of that, but Judge Turner stood a head above the others for it was his duty to temper the hearsay with facts and not rely upon unproven suspicions.

He was still sitting there when it became dark and Stacy tapped softly on the door before entering. Judge Turner told him to enter.

STACY didn't light any lamps. He sat down in the semi-darkness and remained silent. Judge Turner moved his big chair about until he faced his son.

"You heard, Stacy? You heard the news about Bode and the others?"

"Yes. They're all alive. Something else has happened too. Remember old Billy Bonner who camps out near the canyon close by Mitch Clark's house? He's been sick and he just got to town. Somebody told him the news and he—Father, this is going to hit hard."

Judge Turner sighed deeply. "He's saying that Mitch Clark didn't kill Shorty Payson. What else is there to finish this except the proof that Mitch was innocent of any crime?"

"That's the way it is," Stacy said. "Billy Bonner swears he saw Shorty ride the

canyon trail that night. Shorty's horse bucked and threw him over the rim. What's more, he says he saw Jesse riding toward Mitch's house long before Shorty went over the canyon. The Masked Rider was with her. At least, it was a man who wore a cloak and a mask."

Judge Turner stood up. "A man can be a fool may times in his life, but only once can he be as big a fool as me. I hated Mitch because he wouldn't back me. He said I was a hanging judge and I was. I wanted more power and Mitch was in the way, so I hated him. I wanted to think he was a murderer just as everybody in town wanted to think that."

"Father," Stacy broke in. "Nobody can say it was your fault."

"My fault? Who else can accept the blame?" Judge Turner demanded. "Son, walk on home ahead of me. Saddle up, fetch my saddle-bags and bedroll. I'll need a Winchester and my six-gun."

"But—but where are you going?"

"Going? I don't know. I don't even care, long as I don't have to face people who know me as a man who caused a friend to be killed. I'm no judge. I can't be trusted to hand out justice. I'm finished and I won't stay here to watch people pick my bones."

Without a word, Stacy hurried back to the house. He was bursting to talk, to tell the whole truth as he knew it, but his lips were sealed. His father had to suffer. There was no help for it because everything depended upon the entire town believing that Judge Turner had sent his friend to his death.

When the Judge arrived, Stacy had everything ready. The judge slipped into boots, donned a flannel shirt and a vest. He put on a worn hat, strapped the gun belt around his lean hips and picked up the Winchester.

Stacy said, "Father, this will be over soon. You've got to believe me. It isn't as bad as it looks."

"Nothing could be worse," Judge Turner said. He climbed stiffly into the saddle and without a backward glance rode into the street, turned north and kept going until the darkness swallowed him up.

Beyond the outskirts another rider came out of the gloom and swung in beside Turner. The newcomer wore a cloak and a domino mask and he talked in a quiet, reassuring voice. Soon both men had vanished into the night.

CHAPTER XIV

Distant Trails

REPERCUSSIONS began the next day. Before sunset, Marshal Badgette rode out of town, leaving no peace-officer to take his place. Miller and Frazer appeared two days later to prove they were not dead.

Mrs. Slocum rode in with her wounded husband and the story of owl-hooters who burned her ranch and named Mitch Clark as their boss. People didn't know who or what to believe.

Gradually, before a week was out, strange cowboys began drifting into town. They were rough and tough and let everyone know it. The only man they heeded was Len Yeary and before many days, Yeary wore the Marshal's star.

Then a gambling place opened where Adam Rand had kept his leathergoods shop. A cheap saloon took over some idle property which had belonged to Judge Turner. Slowly now, the town lost its serenity. By night drunken cowhands shot out windows, fought bloody battles in the street and men took to wearing guns again.

Ten days after Judge Turner disappeared, a delegation headed by Ben Kilrain, still the prosecuting attorney, came to Dan Langan's offices. They were ushered into the largest of the rooms and Dan Langan stood before them.

Kilrain said, "Dan, things ain't goin' right and yuh know it as well as we. No cheap gamblers and saloon keepers ever got past our borders before, but now they flock here."

Langan held up his hands. "Friends, I know that, but how can I stop them? When Mitch Clark and Judge Turner were here to help me, it was easy but now I'm alone."

"You took over Mitch's property and what little Judge Turner left," Kilrain argued. "You could keep them out."

Dan Langan's features grew stern, his eyes hard. "So you think I care a hoot what happens to this town now. Well, I

don't. You killed Mitch Clark and he was an innocent man. You sent Judge Turner packing because he couldn't face you. Now you expect me to side you, but I'm not going to do it. This town is now wide open to anyone who wants to come and stay."

"We won't stand for it, Dan," Kilrain shouted.

"What'll you do?" Langan demanded. "I've got enough men to keep control here. Marshal Yeary is on my side. You want to buck us, go ahead but I'm warning you we'll meet you with hot lead. That's all. Don't come back here."

Someone bustled through the crowd. Judge Matt Turner moved up beside Ben Kilrain. Langan stared at him.

Langan said, "You dared to come back here? Matt, they'll tear you apart."

Langan looked wildly about the room until he saw Len Yeary and signaled him with a flick of his eye. Yeary nodded, pulled his holster around and put a hand on the gun butt. He moved toward Judge Turner.

Turner didn't see, didn't even glance around. He talked to Langan, but his words were meant for the crowd in the room.

"You all say I killed Mitch Clark. Maybe I meant to. A man can refuse to see the truth when his heart and head is full of hate. But I didn't kill Mitch any more than he killed the four men he was accused of killing."

"What are you talking about?" Langan bellowed. "Mitch lies buried."

While Judge Turner kept everyone occupied, a gray-haired man with a hat pulled down over his face, had moved to the left fringe of the crowd. Now he stepped forward and lifted his hat off his head. He was Mitch Clark.

Mitch Clark said, "You're talkin' about an empty casket up there, Dan. Wasn't nobody in it. We wanted you to think I was dead so we'd see what yuh were goin' to do with the whole town in your hand. I guess we saw all right."

There were shouts of surprise and pleasure from the assembled men. Langan was white-faced and tight-lipped. Yeary was moving up on both Judge Turner and Mitch Clark now. There was the cold light of murder in his eyes.

Judge Turner spoke. "You had to get rid of Mitch and me because we'd have stopped you from taking over the town, Dan. You couldn't just have us gunned out. That would have been too raw. But if Mitch and me got to hate one another and Mitch was suspected of murder, then I'd be duty bound to have him hung. It happened, like you planned. Only Mitch got away. I thought he was dead, you had your hired men prove he was innocent and there was nothing left for me but to get out of town. That was what you were after."

LANGAN backed up a step or two. There was a door to his right. It led to an alley and a stable where horses were usually kept saddled. When Yeary opened fire, Langan made up his mind to sprint for the door.

Yeary was very close now. Nobody paid any attention to him. He was drawing his gun slowly and maneuvering to a position from which he could shoot Judge Turner and then switch his aim to kill Mitch before he could be stopped.

Langan took another backward step. Suddenly a hand pressed against the small of his back, a foot was inserted between his legs and he was thrown sideways. He tripped and fell heavily.

A low, booming voice rang out. "Yeary, turn your guns this way and die—or drop them and live!"

Yeary and everyone else gasped at the sight of the Masked Rider standing above Langan. The side door was still open, showing how the masked man had entered.

Yeary didn't hesitate. He swung around, his gun kicking before he got it to an aim. The Masked Rider's draw was a blur of action. The .45 roared twice. Yeary, lifting his sights for the kill, staggered back under the impact of two big slugs. He opened his mouth wide, worked his jaws vainly and did his best to lift the gun. Then he fell over on his side and sprawled at full length on the floor.

The Masked Rider shoved the .45 back into its holster.

"Now all of you have seen what Dan Langan was after. He wanted the whole town. He wanted to turn it into a cheap place with gambling, bad booze, cheating and shooting. Because he would have profited from it. To get control he had to

drive out the men who would have stopped him in his tracks. You know how he did it."

"There's a dozen different stories," Ben Kilrain called out.

"Only one is the truth," the masked man said. "Bode, Miller and Fraser were hired by Langan. They rode off after exchanging clothes and papers with three of Langan's owl-hooters who had died in a shooting fracas among themselves. The bodies were dressed in the clothes of the missing men and dumped into the canyon. The bodies were chewed up by the rocks so nobody could tell who it was except by their clothes.

"Then Shorty Payson was thrown over and the blame pinned on Mitch Clark. You know what happened after that. Mitch was money-hungry and admits it. He's changed now. He was hated. People wanted to think of him as a killer.

"But he had a soft side too, though he'd never admit it. Them who owed him and were in trouble by no fault of their own, like the Widow Thompson, found gold when they needed it most. Mitch put that gold for them to find but if you busted both his arms he'd never admit it.

"Langan was different. His ranch had two crews of men working on it. One was honest, the other was a crowd of kill-crazy bandits. They burned and raided and stole, saying they worked for Mitch Clark."

"You can't blame us for believing all that," Ben Kilrain cried. "Even Matt Turner was fooled."

"Sure he was, because Langan was smart. As it happened, his plans nearly panned out. Mitch Clark was almost killed. It took Stacy Turner to save him. He's going to make a mighty fine doctor for this town, 'specially since his wife will be a doggone good nurse too."

Mitch Clark moved up beside the Masked Rider, where he could watch Dan Langan who still lay on the floor, afraid to get up. Clark grinned at the crowd.

"Make him tell yuh how he figgered it out," he said.

The Masked Rider raised his hands to quiet the crowd. "It didn't take much. When Mitch Clark sent a letter asking Jesse to come and stay with him, Langan got the letter and, thinking that Jesse was a man, sent some of those hard-cases of his out to kill Jesse. So it couldn't have been Judge Turner who gave those orders, because Turner knew that Jesse was a girl. Knew all about her. Langan didn't. And it was Langan who told Marshal Badgette to set a trap for me. Only Judge Turner and Stacy knew about the night court in time to set the trap. Stacy told Don Langan, trusting him as everyone else did.

"Langan did everything to show he was good and on the side of law and order. Len Yeary and Slim Davis didn't like a drifting cowboy named Morgan because Morgan had crossed them. They set out to kill him, but Morgan gunned Slim down. Langan was close by and when he saw that Yeary might get a bullet too, he moved in and pretended to save Morgan. That was a good stunt."

"Let's string him up," a voice from the crowd shouted angrily.

THE Masked Rider waved his arm again. "You saw what one lynching led to. Don't be fools. Give him a fair trial. Don't convict him out of court. You almost lost your town by doing that. Listen to Judge Turner. He'll tell you what to do."

Turner faced the crowd and began to speak eloquently. When he finished, someone noticed that the Masked Rider had gone. There was a concerted rush to the street. The only man they found was Wayne Morgan, idly leaning against the corner of a building while he hacked away at a stick of wood with a knife.

Judge Turner stepped up to him. "Morgan, did you see the Masked Rider ride away?"

"Reckon I did," Morgan said slowly. His hand stretched to the east and his finger pointed. "Went thataway. Ridin' easy-like and I guess he wasn't worried none."

"Morgan," Mitch Clark moved closer. "Why didn't you stop him?"

Morgan interrupted. "Stop him? Mr. Clark, I ain't a man to mess 'round with fast guns. And then, I got no grudge against the Masked Rider. He ain't never done me no harm."

"I don't believe he ever harmed anyone who didn't deserve it," Judge Turner said.

"Them hired gunslicks of Langan's," Morgan said, "were fixin' to throw me into the canyon. The Masked Rider fought 'em

and that made him my friend. Yuh listenin' to me, Mr. Clark?"

Mitch Clark was watching Jesse and Stacy riding slowly toward them in the buckboard. He turned to Morgan.

"I heard yuh. Now I got a offer. Reckon I won't be havin' Jesse livin' with me much longer, Morgan. You interested in a steady job?"

Morgan sadly shook his head. "I was aimin' to tell you I was driftin' on. Me, I like driftin'. A man never knows what's waitin' over the skyline. That's why I keep movin'. So if you don't mind, I'll be drawin' my pay."

"I wish yuh'd stay, Morgan," Mitch said. "But a man's got a right to do what he wants. I'll pay yuh off."

Soon after, Wayne Morgan walked ahead of his roan, down the street toward the horizon. It was true—skylines were always in the distance to Wayne Morgan, the Masked Rider. Beyond them were to be found people who needed help and people who lived by the gun. The West was big and wide and dangerous. Men like the Masked Rider tamed it and risked their lives so that others could live in peace.

Wayne Morgan whistled gayly as he moved along. Nobody paid any attention to the Indian, draped in a blanket, who rose to follow him. But when both men were out of sight of town, they rode side by side. Blue Hawk rode proudly, his eyes alight in the knowledge that good work had been done and that there would be more good work to do.

"There Are Strange Riders in the Sunstone Hills—Who Come and Go Like Shadows!"

THE girl trembled with fear as she spoke to the Masked Rider. She had just come upon the scene—and she stared in horror at the dead man at Wayne Morgan's feet.

"You—you did that?"

Morgan nodded. "It had to be done. A bunch of 'em had this youngster caught in a trap. I managed to ride in and break it up."

For the first time, the girl noticed the wounded Dan Kent. She dropped on her knees to smooth the hair back from the brow of the hurt man.

"I don't know whether we can save him or not," said Morgan. "But these Sunstone Hills are the center of a lot of queer things, and it's a made-to-order setup for badmen who need a handy route for escape across the border from one state to another. I reckon Dan Kent must have tried to buck the outlaws. . . ."

"I'll ride to Horseshoe Ranch and have a wagon sent for him," the girl said quickly. "There's a doctor in Grass Valley who can come here."

As the Masked Rider looked at the departing girl, he speculated on the strange happenings here in the Sunstones, and knew that he needed all his wits and gunswift to combat the—

RIDERS OF THE SHADOW TRAIL

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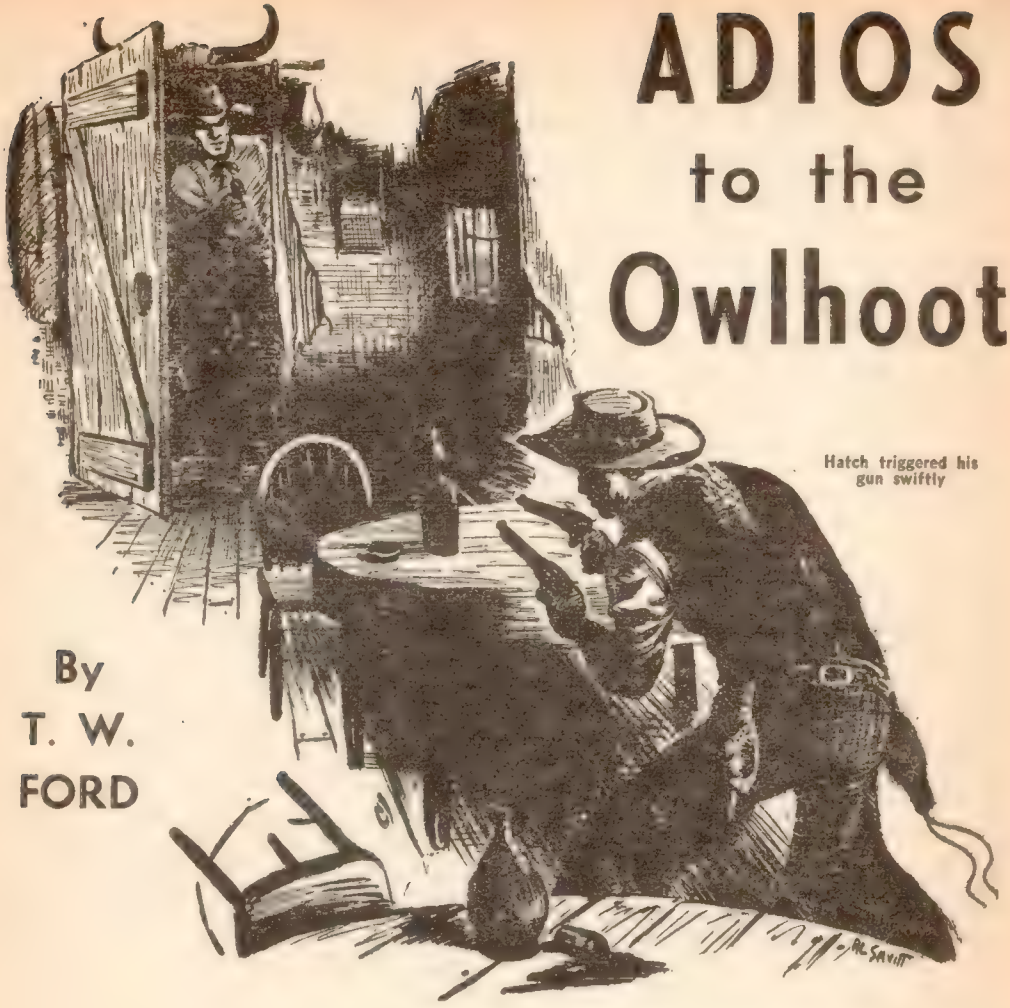


Hatch triggered his gun swiftly

By T. W. FORD

A bounty hunter's guns are the last signpost on Gila Smith's long road to perdition. . . .

THE three of them stood in the little ramshackle cabin tucked deep in the chaparral jungle. Gila Smith, head of the little outlaw band, was tall, high-shouldered, and hawk-nosed. His small lidded eyes mirrored a bitterness at life, stirred restlessly. A hard man in his way, yet he always gave the other devil a square shake.

And there was Joe Hatch, Smith's first lieutenant, a shorter man than his boss, but bull-chested and short legged. He had black hair, carefully parted at one side, capping his blunt-jawed homely face. Hatch's chief characteristic, loyalty, was stamped all over that face. And finally there was Gila Smith's wife, Liza, who was very small and whose hair was the color of honey.

"It's got to be done sooner or later—so why not now?" she said firmly, dark intense eyes switching from one man to the other.

"Liza's right, Joe," said Gila, walking

slowly halfway around the table. He exhaled streamers of stogie smoke from his hawk nose. "That Foster, he don't never give up. Never. It's him—or us!"

Joe Hatch shrugged his heavy shoulders. "I suppose so, Gila," he said thoughtfully. "Only, more bloodshed—" He left the rest unsaid. Hatch knew how Gila detested killing or shooting if it could be avoided. He knew Gila like a brother. He couldn't have thought any more of a brother. They'd been saddle pards for years. He sucked on his quirly, hands brushing the tied-down Colts at his hips.

"Sure, but it's Foster's blood or ours," Liza said sharply. She'd been married to Gila about a year. Joe Hatch hadn't been with Gila when he suddenly up and got hitched. Joe doidn't know yet whether or not he liked Liza, the ex-card dealer.

LIZA seemed almighty fond of the tall Gila. Yet Joe had not been unaware of the smoldering glances she'd thrown his way when they might be alone. Then she'd laugh as he'd try to keep poker-faced with the blood pounding like hammers in his veins.

And he'd never forgotten the time, a few months back, when they'd gone to that spot in the Shoshones where Gila had cached his share of the dinero from a long ago stage hold-up. It had seemed safe to get it then. At the time Gila had married, it was common knowledge along the owlhoot trails that he was a well-to-do man. They'd reached the cache at night. It wasn't there; somebody had stumbled on the dinero. Joe Hatch would never forget the look on Liza's face, pallid under the moon.

"Foster—or us," Liza said again, watching her husband through the cloud of smoke ascending from his stogie.

"She's right, Joe," Gila said slowly. He fingered the gun in the holster rig that lay on the table between two tin plates. He talked on, and Joe Hatch knew Gila was repeating the arguments the woman had given him since her return to the camp.

"Foster's a reformed gunman who's become a danged bounty hunter and made himself rich at it," Hatch said. "He never gives up. And he's whittling us down, slow but sure. Back in Cuxton he burnt down Jimmy Ladd. Then he caught good old Harry Moon and slapped him behind bars. Now he's right down here in Aurora. Sooner or later he'll find out where we're holed up. Then—"

Joe nodded. "We could hit the trail again." He knew the woman had put this thing in Gila's head, and wondered why she was so set on taking care of the bounty-hungry manhunter, Trig Foster. This Foster who was no accredited lawman; who worked on his own to run down and bring in any gent with a fat enough reward on his head. And Foster didn't care much how he brought them in; dead or alive, he got his money. He'd sworn to deliver Gila Smith to the Law and see a hempen necktie around his neck.

It was over a killing, the slaying of a Justice of the Peace in a little pueblo off the Yango range. The peace officer, roaring orey-eyed, had picked trouble with Gila in a barroom, not even knowing who he was. Had forced Gila to go for a gun in self defense, as he himself drew. Gila had shot him through the leg, knocking him flat. Then there had been another shot, from somebody in the throng. And the peace officer had rolled over once, a cracked window in his skull, dead.

Gila and Joe had busted the breeze out of there. Later they'd gotten information that the killing had been pinned on them, and that the bounty-hunting Trig Foster was on their back trail. The two thousand five hundred posted on Gila's head made it worth his time.

"We could ride on," Joe suggested again.

But Gila and the woman shook their heads. "No sense in running no more, Joe," Gila said. He looked fondly at his wife. "Things are different now. And—I got plans."

Jot Hatch understood. He knew Gila, around a campfire at night, used to muse aloud about having a son, at least one. Gila had talked about someday having a little ranch of his own where a man could raise a family. Gila had always lived with the hope of one day going straight. Now it was almost possible. After all, he'd been driven to the lobo game originally. A while back he'd done a stretch in the Big House. So now the Law had nothing against him—save that killing down Yango way, of which he was innocent.

"Somebody's got to meet Foster—handle him. Smoke it out." Gila's eyes strayed through the window to the other three of the bunch lounging outside. He shook his head. No sense in depending on them. They wouldn't go up against the bounty-hunter, the jackal who strung along with the Law. Trig Foster had put lead into too many men.

"It's got to be done," Gila said. "Wound him and lay him up for a spell, at least. Mebbe that might cool him off. But it's got to be done, face to face, stand-up fashion, with him getting a chance to draw. That way, it'll be all right. After all, Foster is hated by his own breed. Nobody'll mind seeing that snake who lives on other men's blood getting it—that way."

"But it's got to be done," Liza said sharply.

"He's after us two," Gila said. "I reckon I can go in and make the play."

Joe said, "Like you said, it's us two he's after. So it's either you or me, Gila. And I got as much responsibiilty for him as you. I can buck Foster too." He pinched out his quirly stub and tossed it through the paneless window. "So—"

"So you'll cut cards for it," the woman said, a shrill note in her voice. She went over to a shelf and got a deck of dog-eared cards. Brought them back to the table and shuffled them with a card sharp's professional precision. She stacked the deck, motioned to Joe. "Cut."

He smiled a little, lifted the top third of the deck. "Low man goes into Aurora?" Gila nodded. Joe turned up the bottom card of the bunch he'd lifted. A ten of clubs. "Looks like me," he said nonchalantly.

GILA moved forward. But Liza gave him a charming smile. "Let me cut for you, honey." And the former lady card dealer did so. She turned up the card and her face went blank. It was the six of hearts. Gila was low man.

"I go, it looks like," Gila said with a little laugh. "I'll leave late tonight. Hit Aurora right after dawn. Foster's putting up at that rooming house over the hash joint. It"ll be him or me—"

As the night wore on, Joe Hatch got more and more restless. Something, he didn't know what, told him this thing wasn't good. That something was wrong. He was hunkered down before the tiny campfire in front of the cabin in the chaparral. One of the brush poppers, who lived in the chaparral too, had come into the camp earlier to borrow some flour. Maybe that was what made him nervous, Joe told himself. Yet that gent would have no way of knowing Gila was going into town to settle with Trig Foster.

The three men of the outfit were playing a desultory game of stud for match sticks by the firelight. Gila sat over on a stump, looking glum. He was always depressed when Liza was away from him. But she'd left that afternoon, riding north to Indian Creek to visit some relatives she'd been talking about up that way. Said she'd return the next day. That was innocent enough, it seemed. Womenfolk, as Joe knew, always liked to visit relatives. But still the uneasy feeling mounted in him.

Finally he straightened up, motioned Gila with a gesture of his head, and went into the cabin. He put a match to the candle on the tin can lid on the table. Gila came in, long big-boned hands hooked into the waistband of his pants.

"Gila, you ain't going into Aurora," Joe said.

"It's gotta be done, Joe. And I—"

"No. You ain't going. I am, Gila."

"You're locoed!" Gila swore and his eyes flashed angrily. "I lost on the cut. I—"

"No, Gila. Look, you're too plumb well known. You'd be spotted soon as you hit the pueblo. And Foster'd be tipped off. And, like you know, Trig Foster ain't too particular how he cuts down a wanted man."

"That's my risk, Joe. I didn't come over the hill yesterday. Foster's got to be cooled off. He lost his nerve when Washita Brown put lead in him. Never tried to run him down again."

"I know." Joe Hatch nodded. "But I'm going to do the job—not you, Gila. You're married. You can't take that chance with —with Liza waiting for you to come back."

"She knew how I lived when she married me, Joe."

Hatch lied then. "Gila, mebbe I shouldn't say this. I know she hasn't told you. Liza's a little scairt. I reckon. But

she told me."

"What, Joe?"

"She's with child, Gila. Your son, mebbe."

Gila Smith's jaw popped. He drew his long flat body to full height, going rigid. A fierce light, compounded of joy and pride, fired up his lidded eyes. "That—that's wonderful, wonderful, Joe. A baby, a son, mebbe." He grabbed one of Joe's shoulders in a grinding grip. "Think of it, Joe. Then—then I'll have something to really live for. I'll make a break from the owlhoot. Liza, she's wonderful." He panted with his emotion.

"That's why you can't go into Aurora, Gila. I got nothing much to lose. You—well, you can't do it for Liza's sake. For her and the baby." Joe saw Gila hesitate. "I go, Gila."

Moments slipped by. Then Gila Smith nodded slowly. "All right, Joe. But I'll never forget it—never. . . ."

The dawn was a roseate bar widening on the eastern horizon when Joe Hatch rode down the long grade toward the cowtown of Aurora. A woman was emptying a bucket of slops from the back door of a cabin at the edge of the little town. Further on the blacksmith was just opening the doors of his barn. A yellow-spotted dog went at a half lope up one of the wooden sidewalks through the thinning ground mist.

JOE HATCH rode down into Aurora. He found the eating place with rooms over it at the second corner. He rode past it, tethering his cayuse at the hitchrail in front of an unopened store. Afoot, he stepped into an alley, checked his guns, slid them back loosely into the holsters. The sun was a segment of blood-red over the ragged hills when he started down the street again. The restaurant was open with a swamper mopping up.

Joe threw at him, "Trig Foster is upstairs. Yeah, I know. He lives here. I want to see him. Tell him to come down, that Joe Hatch is waiting. Sabe? Git going!"

The plump proprietor, a breed, almost as wide as he was high, appeared from the kitchen. He said to the swamper, "Chuck, I'll tell Mr. Foster." He went back into the kitchen. There was a rattling of pots. Then he re-emerged suddenly.

"*Amigo*, you have had a long ride. Yes?" He carried a bottle of whiskey. "One leetle drink, yes, perhaps." He put a glass down on the table near where Joe stood, filled it. "With my compliments, *amigo*."

Joe Hatch needed it. He stared, then picked it up slowly as the breed, in slippers, glided back into the kitchen. The swamper had disappeared too. Down the line somewhere a cock crowed. Joe suddenly had the cowardly wish that he'd let Gila himself come. This Trig Foster was bad medicine, as dangerous as a sidewinder. Joe was just lifting the drink to his face when he heard the creak of door hinges.

It was the door to the enclosed stairs that led to the rooms above. Joe threw the glass from him and spun, instinctively went down into a half crouch as he clawed at holster tops. Dropping into that crouch saved his life. The bullet zinged just over his flat-crowned sombrero, a bullet aimed at his brain.

The bullet came from the half-opened door at the foot of the stairs. Came from Foster's gun. He was there, just inside the door, fully dressed, even to his boots. Joe saw that in a split second. Wondered how. It was evident that Foster had been awaiting his arrival. Foster's gun breathed muzzle-flame again.

But Joe had two weapons up, was triggering the left one fast. Chunks of wood jumped out of the door. He nailed the bounty hunter beneath the ribs. The big bulbous-faced man with the fishlike eyes half buckled, but he had a second weapon in his hand, had it spitting. Joe took lead in the calf of his left leg and was slammed back against a table.

He might have been killed then as his guns sagged in his grip, but a woman appeared on the stairs behind Foster—Liza, Gila's wife. Even in the wan light her yellow hair gleamed.

"Not him, Trig! Not him!" she screeched. After all, when she'd left the chaparral camp, it was Gila who was supposed to come.

In a flash, Joe got it all then. The double-cross! Liza had fallen for this big blustering gunman who hid his bloodletting under the name of the law. She'd been seeing Foster before her marriage, and now, under the guise of visiting rela-

tives, she'd returned to Foster and warned him. As she pulled at his shoulder, Foster was wild with a shot.

Then Joe came away from the table, legs sliding wide. He drove a slug into Foster's thigh. The bounty hunter sat down hard on the stairs. And then Joe Hatch was spinning, dazed, from a shot that nicked him on the side of the head.

It hadn't come from Foster's second weapon. It had come through a side door of the hash house, a door that had been ripped open by a gunman pard Foster had brought along with him on this job. Joe Hatch lunged sideways on his bad leg. The next bullet from the weasel-faced gunner was wide. And then the desperate Joe put a bullet through the man's hat crown. The sand ran out of the dry-gulcher's craw. He vanished, ducking back down the alley.

But it had given big-faced Foster his break. He was off the stairs, stepping out into the room with the treacherous woman behind him, a gun leveled. And Joe Hatch was swaying, fighting off nausea, struggling to steady his guns, seeing Foster through a haze. This looked like it.

ABRUPTLY a new voice blasted the momentary silence of the acrid-aired room. "All right, Joe! I got him—git aside!" It was Gila Smith, Gila who'd followed Joe down the trail into Aurora because he couldn't let another man do his dirty work. He came charging in!

Foster got a dirty greenish look, tried to back through the door to the stairs. Fired once into the floor. Then Gila's .45 talked. Foster got to those stairs, was slammed back onto them by the impact of the bullet that shattered his shooting arm. Foster fell back heavily, almost knocking over Liza. And the coyote streak came out in the bounty hunter.

"Don't kill me, Gila!" he whined in a pain-torn voice. "I—I'm helpless now. You c-cain't blast a helpless man. No, I ain't got a gun! Don't! I'll forget you—never bother you again, Gila. I got a wife, Gila. Fer—"

Gila said, "Shut down!" He stared at Liza, unable to believe it at first. His eyes pinched closed in emotional agony, a dry sob escaping from his throat.

Gila Smith walked forward, mouth wrenched with bitterness as he understood the game she'd played. Then he laughed harshly. "He's all yours now, Liza. Let's ride out, Joe."

Gila got over to his saddle pard and slid an arm under Joe's shoulders. They moved out of the place together, guns up to warn the men who'd appeared along the road. Finally they reached their hip-drooped ponies. Gila helped Joe up.

"T'ain't a bad wound, Gila. Just a flesh rip," Joe said.

"Sure, we're running in luck," Gila said. They turned their ponies and rode out of Aurora unhurriedly. Gila Smith rubbed his eyes with a shirt sleeve once. "She sure was a pretty filly," he said. And that was the last time he ever spoke of his wife who'd planned for him to get killed.

They went up the hill at a hand lope. Gila said, "We'll tell the boys at the camp to clear out. Then we'll push south along Indian Creek, git out of these parts. You were right, Joe. We should've rode afore."

"It's all right, Gila," Joe Hatch said.

Gila reined up a moment, gazing back at the town in the hollow. No pursuit had formed yet. Trig Foster's nerve had been broken; he wouldn't be hounding them again.

Gila spoke thoughtfully. "She wasn't with child, Joe. You lied to me—to protect me. Joe, I aim to get off this owlhoot. They'll always be somebody ready to sell your skin. I'll git you patched up and clear, then reckon I'll hit into Old Mex. Ain't nothing—even safety—left for me up this side of the line."

"No, Gila." Joe grinned despite the hurt leg. "Gila, you never killed a man. You served your time for the other things. They's just this false charge of shooting that peace officer."

"I know," Gila said. "But—"

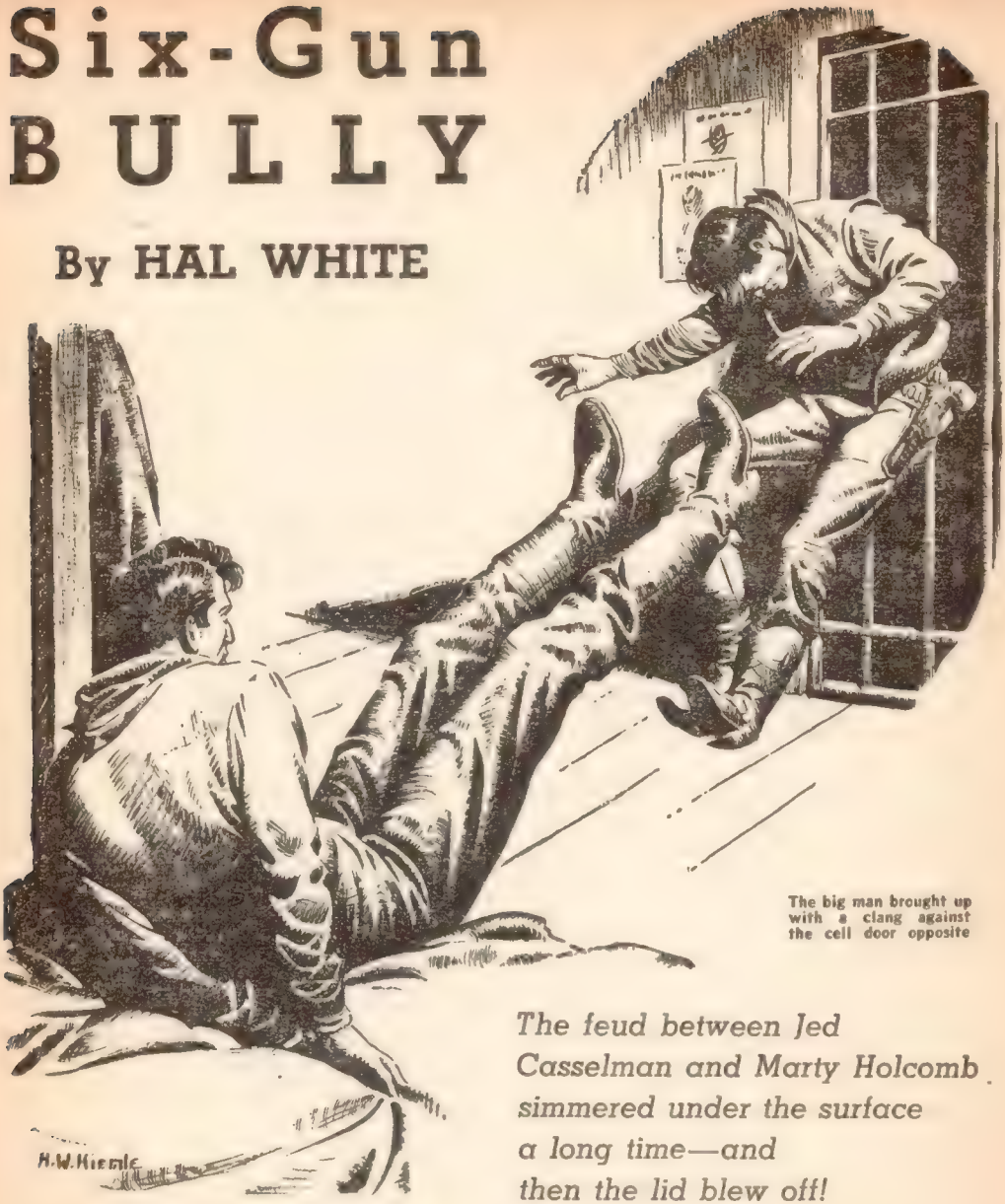
"Stop that jaw-flapping," Joe said. "I been sending dinero I saved, up to a bank in Montana. Got a right nice chunk put by. We'll change our handles and pick up a small spread."

Gila stared into Joe's face. Then he nodded. "You always were my pard, Joe. Count me in. I'm thinking it'll be danged nice to walk around without a filled holster weighing down my middle. Yeah—only I sorta wish I'd drilled that Foster dead center."

Joe chuckled. "He's worse off alive, Gila. He's got Liza on his hands!"

Six-Gun BULLY

By HAL WHITE



The big man brought up with a clang against the cell door opposite

The feud between Jed Casselman and Marty Holcomb simmered under the surface a long time—and then the lid blew off!

JED CASSELMAN was good with a gun. Fast enough, anyway, so that the community of Signal Butte was afraid of him. Sober, he had a narrow streak of something like caution in him. Not decency, just caution. Drunk, he threw off his shots, was likely to be erratic. But with three or four stiff drinks he became ugly, belligerent, dangerous—and his shooting was at its best.

There were a few men in the countryside he respected for their speed and marksmanship. A few. When any of these were in the Wagon Wheel Saloon, Jed kept his gun in its holster and his tongue between his teeth. But these few were not there often enough to cramp Jed's style or his actions very much, and he

strutted insufferably.

"Got this here town in my hip pocket, 'long with my plugcut," he was wont to boast.

Jed was a sort of hanger-on around the town. He did odd jobs, but he got good pay. A lot of folks were afraid of him, and they paid him more than he was worth. It was a lot cheaper than a .45 slug in the middle or the back, some night.

It was on a Wednesday evening—usually a quiet midweek night in the Wagon Wheel—that Jed set himself to torment a button who was in from a nearby ranch with a handful of steers. The button's name was Dave Barker. He wore a gun, but he should not have, because he didn't know how to use it, and it was just an excuse for someone like Jed to go after him.

The button came into the saloon for a drink before starting his homeward journey. That was about eight o'clock. Jed was there, and Jed was just getting going good with the liquor. He spotted the kid at once, and bellied up beside him. He jogged the lad's elbow just as Dave was lifting his whisky glass to drink.

The whisky spilled, and young Barker turned his head to glare at Jed. Casselman gave him a grin that was all meanness and broken yellow teeth and narrowed yellow eyes.

"That there stuff's for men," he sneered. "Milk's your drink! Bartender, a glass of milk for my friend here—on me."

Barker set down his glass and backed up a little to face Casselman. The kid's eyes were blazing and his hand hovered over his gun. But he knew Jed's reputation, and he knew better than to go for the weapon in his holster.

Over at one of the poker tables, men watched with disapproval, and one of them spoke up.

"Leave the kid alone, can't yuh, Jed? He's done nothin' to you."

Jed Casselman whirled. "Was you asked for an opinion? If yore buyin' chips in this here game, you know the price."

His big fist was close to his gun butt, his heavy shoulders crouched a little.

The man who had spoken couldn't cut it, and he knew it. Jed was too fast for him. He subsided, muttering, and Jed turned again to the boy.

"Make yore play, hombre!" he challenged.

Dave Barker was white as a sheet, but he was game, too. He went for his gun.

Jed didn't center him with a slug. Even Jed, bully though he was, knew that the town would never take *that*. So Jed just whipped out his own cutter and fired—once. The gun flew out of the boy's hand and skidded in the sawdust.

"Now," snarled Jed, "s'pose you do a nice little skirt dance for me and the boys. Go ahead—start!"

"No!" said Dave Barker hotly, and at once a slug tore the floor close to his feet and went ricocheting into a corner.

"Dance!" commanded Jed, and his gun roared again. "Dance!"

Dave Barker danced. He was no coward, but he danced, while the men in the room watched unhappily and growled curses under their breaths.

Jed was a two-gun man. When the right-hand one was empty he reached for the left, got it out, and had fired one shot when there came an interruption. The batwings swung and someone came in.

Jed turned clear around then, facing the newcomer, who was striding steadily toward him. This new man was a lean hombre, not overly tall, but built for speed and power. Young, and with eyes like steel and a jaw like granite under a soft-brimmed sombrero set at a cocky angle on his dark head.

Jed didn't know him, but that didn't matter. Anyone with half an eye could see that the stranger meant business. Gun business, mebbe—but business, surely. Jed Casselman's iron came up, the muzzle centered on the striding man.

"Jest hold it right there, feller," he grated. "That's far enough!"

THE NEWCOMER didn't stop, didn't even slow his steady stride, and his steely eyes locked with Casselman's now rather panicky stare.

Jed could have fired, but he didn't. The other could have drawn, but he didn't. He just kept right on coming, paying no more attention to the yawning muzzle of Casselman's big six-gun than if it had been a fly swatter.

And when he got within two paces of Jed, he seemed literally to leave the floor and fly through the air at him. The thud

of his fist on Jed's jaw sounded like the hitting of a side of beef with the flat of a cleaver.

Jed went down with a crash that jiggled the flame of the overhead oil lamps. He went down and he stayed down, and the blood dribbled out of his half-opened mouth and ran down his stubbled jaw.

Then a couple of his friends helped him to his feet, and he stood, weaving, staring under lowered brows at the stranger.

"This ain't over, fella," he said. "It's just started! I dunno what call you had to horn in on somethin' that was none of your dang nevermind. But I'm warnin' yuh—I'll get you for it if it's the last thing I do!"

The stranger stood with his back to the bar. He looked at Jed, and his lips quirked in a smile. But his eyes did not smile. They were as cold as a gun barrel under a winter moon.

"Make your play." The lips smiled but the eyes did not. "Make your play any time, mister!"

Jed stood a moment, staring, his eyes venomous with hate. Then he turned and went out, still groggy. The batwings flapped and were still, and for a minute the room was still, too. Then a townsman named Fenton spoke up.

"That's somethin' I've been wanting to see for months. What might be your name, stranger?"

For a brief moment the face of the newcomer froze into a mask. Then he relaxed.

"No secret, I reckon. I'm Marty Holcomb, new ramrod on the H Bar C."

"Where yuh from, Marty?" asked another voice, and Holcomb's face went grim again.

"In my country," he said, "we don't ask a man where he's from."

And with that, he turned his back to his questioners, signaled the bartender.

Thus began the feud between Jed Casselman and Marty Holcomb. But it was a feud that simmered under the surface for a long time before the lid finally blew off.

Jed, for all his ugliness, had a sort of animal cunning, and he began scheming right away for his revenge. The new foreman of the big Harry Cosgrove spread —the H bar C—soon proved to be as good with a gun as he was with his fists, and Jed knew better than to match draws with Marty. He began working under cover, and Holcomb's refusal to say where he was from gave Jed an idea.

Soon the rumor went around Signal Butte that Marty Holcomb was wanted somewhere in Texas—this was Wyoming —for rustling and stage robbery. No one seemed to know just where or how the rumor began—no one except Jed—but it spread quickly, and some folks chose to believe it.

The tall, cleancut young foreman never bothered to deny it. He simply ignored it.

Several weeks passed, and along in midsummer Sheriff Murt Rogers lost his deputy in a gun battle. Rogers was a disagreeable sort of man, hard to work with and rather given to the same kind of bullying tactics as was Jed Casselman. So the deputy's job begging for several days, and then Jed put in for it—and got it.

And if Jed Casselman had strutted before, he became impossible now. He walked behind that star on his vest as a man of position and authority in the community. But his real reason for wanting the job was for the leverage it might give him over Marty Holcomb.

In everything he did, he was getting ready for the showdown with Marty Holcomb. Holcomb under his fists, Holcomb under his gun, helpless and bloody and beaten. Jed thought of nothing else, dreamed of nothing else.

ALONG in early autumn, a young saddle tramp hit town, raised a ruckus in the Wagon Wheel and got thrown in jail. There Jed Casselman got it out of him that he had ridden the owlhoot. His name was Frank Price, and in build, in the way he carried himself, he looked a lot like Marty Holcomb.

That gave Jed another idea. The rumor was still around that Marty was wanted for stage robbery. So Jed began laying the groundwork for a new move against the young foreman. He talked to Frank Price, alone, through the barred door of Price's cell one afternoon.

"Look, Price, I can get enough on you, if I begin askin' around and follerin' your backtrail, to keep you in the jug till yuh got whiskers to your insteps. But neither me nor Sheriff Rogers wanted to pick on yuh, so I'm gonna let yuh go."

Price stood there, staring coldly through the bars of the door.

"What's the catch, deputy?" he said.

"No catch. Only, in return for goin' free, mebbe you'd be willin' to do me a small favor."

Price, fashioning a cigarette in his fingers, gave it a lick with his tongue before he answered.

"What's this here 'small favor'?"

Casselman leaned closer to the bars, spoke in low tones. "It's this, Price." He went on to explain.

When he had finished, Frank Price stood there and in a steady, quiet monotone cursed the deputy with every name he could lay his tongue to. But Frank was a wanted man, and Casselman knew it. Casselman had him dead to rights.

"Okay, I got no choice," Price said. "I'll do yore dirty work, Casselman—in return for goin' free."

Thus it happened that, a week later, the stage from Collinsville to Signal Butte was held up by a pair of bandits and an express shipment in minted gold taken. One of the bandits remained in the brush with a leveled rifle. The other came into the open, wearing a handkerchief mask, and picked up the express box tossed down by the messenger.

This second bandit, in his build and in his movements, looked so much like Marty Holcomb that the driver, the messenger, and at least two of the passengers were ready to swear it was none other than the young foreman of the H Bar C.

Sheriff Rogers went hightailing out to the scene of the crime. Shortly he was joined by Deputy Casselman, who had been, supposedly, up in the hills on some kind of official business when the robbery occurred.

They found the express box broken open, empty and abandoned in the brush. Also, they found a bit of steel that was evidently the broken-off tip of the blade of a heavy hunting knife. Broken, it seemed, in wangling open the express box.

Casselman stuck that in his pocket, and, along with several citizens, he and the sheriff went in search of Holcomb.

Marty was out on the range when they reached the H Bar C, but Cosgrove told them to go ahead and search all they pleased.

"There's the bunkhouse," he said. "Help yourself. Marty Holcomb no more robbed that stage than I did. But I ain't standing in the way of the law. Go ahead and look."

They didn't find any of the gold or other valuables the express box had contained. But, way down under stuff in a duffel bag, they did find a hunting knife with a broken blade.

"Reckon that ties it," Sheriff Rogers said, and he was honest enough about it. "With anyhow four folks sayin' the bandit was Holcomb, an' now this, looks like there ain't no doubt."

So, when Marty came in, all unsuspecting, Casselman had the satisfaction of putting a gun in his back. They handcuffed him then and there, his hands behind him.

"For robbery," growled Casselman, "and let's see yuh talk yoreself out of it! *This*, for instance!"

He showed the broken knife.

"It's mine, sure," the prisoner admitted. "Been in my bag so long, I'd almost forgot I had it. Somebody swiped it, framed me with that broken tip."

CASSELMAN jeered, held back with difficulty the urge to spit in the face of the helpless Holcomb. There would be time enough for that, and other things, when he had him in jail, with no witnesses around.

He had paid a renegade H Bar C puncher to get that knife, well in advance of the robbery. It had gone back into Marty's bag before the holdup, and Casselman had taken the broken tip with him and planted it in the brush.

It had all worked out fine. Casselman, fully masked, up there with the rifle, with nothing but the gun showing. Price, who was a dead ringer for Holcomb in build and way of moving, to show himself and pick up the express box. So now, finally, Casselman had his enemy right where he wanted him.

They rode back to Signal Butte, Holcomb in the middle, handcuffed and helpless. Casselman made good use of the time to hurl every ugly taunt he could think of at the silent prisoner. He even swung a fist at him when Holcomb's horse got a little out of line.

There were four cells in the Signal

Butte jail, but Marty Holcomb was the only prisoner. Dark was coming on when the steel door of one of the cells clanged in Holcomb's face, and Casselman, in the dusky corridor, spoke to Rogers.

"I'm askin' yuh, Sheriff. Lemme handle this hombre. He's my prisoner, sort of."

The sheriff nodded, went out to the office in front and shut the corridor door. Rogers was no crook, would have thrown Casselman into a cell in a minute if he had known the truth of the situation. But he was a brutal man, and in his book a confession obtained with the aid of physical persuasion was as good as any other kind.

Casselman locked himself in the cell with the handcuffed prisoner and turned on the dim, overhead bulb. Holcomb was sitting quietly on the bunk below the single, barred window, and he gave the deputy the same look as that night in the saloon—smiling with his lips, while his eyes were cold steel.

In spite of himself, Casselman felt a chill tickle his spine. The deputy took a deep breath, priming himself.

"Well, fella," he said.

"Well, what?" came the cool reply.

"Well, s'posin'—just s'posin'—yuh confess and get this here business straightened out."

"I didn't rob that stage," came the clipped denial. "But I know who did—and so do you."

"What?"

"You schemed it yourself! Got somebody that looked like me to help yuh. You danged hyena, take off these irons and I'll beat the poison daylights out of yuh!"

"You set there and accuse *me?*"

Casselman advanced menacingly, took his stand before the seated prisoner.

"I shore do!"

Holcomb stood up, and for all the fact that his hands were cuffed behind him, his steely eyes showed no fear.

Casselman got jittery. He had to reassure himself.

"Why, you—" he said, and then he swung a fist.

Holcomb dodged, but the blow grazed his jaw, spilled him backward onto the bunk. He was up again at once. This time, Casselman's blow caught him fair on the nose, knocking him backward and bringing the red of blood to stain his upper lip and the grimness of his mouth.

Casselman laughed, but the laugh died in his throat. For, even as Holcomb was flung backward by the blow, he drew up his legs and drove with all his power at the deputy's stomach. Both feet landed squarely in Casselman's middle, and the big man brought up with a clang against the cell door opposite. He sagged to his knees, gasping for breath.

Narrow-eyed, that cold smile again on his lips, Holcomb watched him.

Casselman, recovering, raised his own eyes to meet that cold stare. Fury racked the deputy and distorted his ugly mouth still further. He got to his feet, and one big hand went into his coat pocket, the fingers finding a pair of brass knuckles. In the silence of the cell, his words gritted like sandpaper.

"Now, Holcomb, it's *my* turn!"

WHAT happened then was the sort of thing to make nauseated the toughest of men.

The prisoner was at once on his feet, and because he knew what those brass knuckles could do to a man, he did his utmost to avoid them. But his features became speedily a pulp of cut and tortured flesh, spilling blood onto his chest. When he was down at last and, mercifully, out cold, Casselman used his boot heels to finish the job.

His rage at last exhausted, his lust for vengeance sated, Casselman stood back, breathing hard, staring down with hate-filled eyes at the still form on the floor.

"That, me bucko," he muttered between his teeth, "takes care of *you!*"

He knelt, removed the handcuffs. Then he swung one last kick at his victim's ribs, and, turning, snapped off the light and left the cell.

When he got into the jail office, he was glad to see that Sheriff Rogers had gone for the night. Casselman got out a bottle and for an hour drank steadily. At last he shoved himself to his feet, staggered into the room adjoining and went to bed.

He was deep in a drunken sleep when a shadow moved along the jail wall and halted beneath the prisoner's window. The battered alarm clock in the sheriff's office had ticked off six or seven hours since the attack, and Marty Holcomb was

conscious and awake on his bunk.

A whispered voice spoke at the window. "Holcomb!"

Holcomb reared his tortured body to a sitting position.

"Yeah?" he whispered back.

"It's Dave Barker, Marty. I'm gettin' yuh out! Got a horse for yuh. Get set and ready." As he spoke, he was knotting the end of his lariat around three of the window bars. "Be ready," he repeated, and dropped back.

A minute, and he put spurs to his horse. The sturdy lariat twanged with strain, but it was the bars, not the rope, that gave. Set in crumbling brick, they yielded with explosive suddenness.

An opening yawned. A man went through it. Saddle leather creaked, hoofs drummed fast in the dark, and then the night was as still as before—and Jed Casselman snored on.

But Jed Casselman was unhappy in his dreams. A sudden nightmare brought him bolt upright in bed, sweating and cursing. Worry gripped him. Maybe Holcomb had died from that beating. Maybe—

He got up and, in the chill dawn, walked back for a look at the man. When he saw the gaping window, he stood for a moment utterly still, gripping the bars of the door and breathing in heavy gasps. He turned, went slowly back to the office.

And then suddenly a chill rippled up his spine. He began to shake uncontrollably and his teeth rattled like castanets. Marty Holcomb was alive, was free, and sometime he would return to Signal Butte!

But the days went on, and the weeks and the months, and Marty Holcomb did not return. Why should he, after all, Casselman thought. If he came back, he would be picked up the moment he hit town, for that stage robbery. Why, the dang saddle tramp didn't *dare* come back!

And then the word sifted in—from where, it didn't matter. The word came to Signal Butte that Frank Price, the man who had impersonated Marty Holcomb in the stage robbery, had been shot in a saloon row in Montana. Before he died he had made a full confession, in the presence of reliable witnesses, of his part in the Collinsville-Signal Butte stage robbery. A full confession, except for one thing: he had died before he had been able to speak the name of the man who had been with him in that robbery—the name of Jed Casselman, who had schemed the robbery and forced Price into it.

THE BURLY deputy gnawed his nails for days over the news, and anxiously watched the out trails for the dust of a rider who might be Marty Holcomb, coming back at last. But Holcomb didn't come, and so, Casselman reasoned, everything was okay. Price had not spoken Jed's name, and no one could ever tie him up with the robbery now, because no one knew except Price, who was dead.

Casselman's heavy heels on the plank walks regained all their old arrogance, and more.

Spring warmed into summer and Jed Casselman, never relaxing his gun practice, had become far and away the fastest man on the draw in the county. He feared no man, now.

He was sitting, alone, one sweltering afternoon, in the jail office, staring out the window, when a dust cloud showed on the western horizon.

He watched it idly. Nothing unusual: a rider nearing. The cloud came closer, and a queer premonition stirred in Jed Casselman. The rider was still too far distant for identification, but something about him telegraphed its import to the burly deputy. His breathing quickened and a long forgotten chill moved up his spine.

The rider came closer—closer. And now, as the dust cloud swirled and the curtain was momentarily drawn back, the face of the rider showed clearly under the tilted-back Stetson.

Marty Holcomb!

The rider passed at an easy canter and with barely a glance at the jail building.

So this was it—this was showdown. But what had Jed Casselman to fear? Today would forever lay the ghost of any apprehension the deputy might have felt for a man who would one day come back. He *had* come back—he was here at last.

Casselman didn't leave the jail office. Let the blasted saddle tramp come to him!

Sheriff Rogers was out on a case. The afternoon dragged on. Casselman played

solitaire, and sweated, and swore to himself, and nothing happened. Nothing happened, and the longer this went on the tighter grew Jed Casselman's nerves.

Finally, he got up, hitched at his gunbelt, started for the door. He would do what he should have done before: take the fight to Holcomb!

But he had not reached the door when it burst open and a man loomed there in the afternoon light. Tensing, he saw then who it was—Bart Ragsdale, the liveryman.

"Marty Holcomb is at the Wagon Wheel, Jed," Rags said excitedly. "Reckon you know there ain't nothing against him any more, since Frank Price confessed. He says for you to come out—"

Jed Casselman laughed, tested the smoothness of his guns in their cutdown holsters. He had never been so confident.

"He sent you?" he growled. "Tell the danged saddle tramp to come out—if he figgers he can cut it!"

"He says you can have the sun behind you, in his face. He don't need no breaks. He says yuh can have first draw. He says jest come out, that's all. Jed, I reckon—"

"Rattle yore hocks, Bart. This is *my* fight!"

The skinny liveryman vanished. The doorway was suddenly clear and the burly form of Jed Casselman filled it. The deputy was on the street, striding along the boardwalk, his hard heels beating a challenge with each step.

Showdown? Fine! There wasn't a man in the county, in the whole danged state, that could match Jed Casselman's draw!

The Wagon Wheel was two blocks down. Casselman walked a block. The street was strangely deserted, and very still. So still, that when a man emerged from the Wagon Wheel, Casselman could hear the flap of the batwings behind him.

The man started walking, and the deputy heard the even, measured sound of his steps on the boards.

MARTY HOLCOMB was the man. Even at more than half a block distance there was no mistaking the smile that twisted his lips and went cold and dead in his eyes.

A little shiver went jittering up the deputy's spine, was gone at once. He hadn't meant to match his steps with Holcomb's, and when he realized that he was doing it he slowed his own pace.

Suddenly, Jed Casselman was afraid. He was more afraid than he had ever been in all his life, and terror sent his hands flashing to the butts of his guns.

He was still a little too far away for effective shooting, but he was seeing Marty Holcomb's face as it had been that night in the cell—pulped and bloody, but with the lips still smiling and the eyes like ice. He was seeing that face, and his guns came up, both of them, to spit flame and thunder.

He might have been shooting at a shadow, at a ghost, for all the effect it had. He stopped, fired again. And when the echo of gun thunder had gone careening down the line of false fronts to die in the desert beyond, the whole world was filled with the deadly steadiness of Marty Holcomb's advancing tread.

And Holcomb's hands still hung at his sides, his guns untouched!

Holcomb's smile had broadened now to a half grin, and his white teeth and his eyes filled Jed Casselman's vision, and his jeering voice was suddenly in the deputy's ears. "Shoot, Casselman! Shoot, man! Here I am! Right here!"

With a great effort, Casselman steadied himself. He leveled his right-hand gun, squeezed the trigger. The gun bucked against his palm and invisible fingers, powerful fingers, caught at Holcomb's shoulder, spun him half around. For a moment. Then once more he was fronting Casselman squarely, moving in, his hands swinging easily, the half grin unchanged.

That was too much for Jed Casselman. He broke then, screaming his rage and fear and bafflement, both his gun muzzles lost in stabbing red flame. And then Holcomb's dangling hands lifted and in one smooth motion his guns were out. The street rocked to the blended thunder of four heavy weapons.

Lead, hot and horribly final, tore through the big deputy. He dropped his guns, buckled at the knees and at the waist, fell. But he knew what had hit him, for in one last glance upward he saw Marty Holcomb's face.

And wherever Jed Casselman was bound, he took with him the memory of a mouth that smiled, while the eyes did not.

The kid fired back at the Mexicans who were swarming down from the stopped train

Glory for a Gunman

By LARRY HARRIS

Old renegade leader Jake Kane wanted to leave the owlhoot trail, but first he had to bury his past!

WARY, tough-bitten old Jake Kane, the border renegade leader, wanted the train holdup tonight to be his last job. And in his slow, groping way he had the marrow-chilling feeling that some of his men were going to kill him. He was too old to be an outlaw boss; he had lost his flash and daring. His mind didn't click as it had once.

There was no moon in Chihuahua that night,

thirty miles south of the border. That was a factor in favor of Jake Kane's outlaw bunch. But as they waited for the midnight train carrying the Carrizo Mines payroll, big aging Jake Kane felt the tension grow among his men. Their nerves were at the breaking point.

Where the full-gauge track cut through a rocky outcropping, they crouched, waiting. Farther back among the boulders their rein-trailed horses stood like black shadows. The outlaw called Utah sat hunkered against a boulder, smoking, drinking from a tequila bottle he carried in the hip pocket of his levis.

Back in the hills a coyote yapped mournfully.

"Yuh sure we're waitin' at the right track," Utah said sneeringly, " in the right country, Kane?"

"Take it easy, Utah," Kane answered without turning. "An' go careful on that bottle."

In the darkness Utah grinned without mirth. His bloodshot eyes glowed like those of a gaunt, hungry timber wolf. He was as big as Jake Kane—a swaggering, gun-hung killer in his late thirties, wanted for a dozen crimes along the border. Drunk or sober he was a dangerous man in a ruckus. Ugly-tempered and vicious, it was common knowledge among the other renegades that he shot his victims in the back. And that he meant to take over Kane's spot when the cards were right.

Twenty years ago, Jake Kane could have passed for Utah's brother. Kane's hair had been black; he swaggered a little and would spit in the Devil's eye. Only Kane had never shot a man in the back. Though always two jumps ahead of a posse, he'd been square with his men. And no man could ever accuse him of being treacherous or mean. Possibly that is why he had lived as long as he had.

Now, crowding sixty, Jake Kane's hair was almost white. Tall, wide-shouldered and weather-beaten, old Jake had haunted black eyes and a vacant way of staring at a man. His gait was shuffling and slow. He talked a little crazy at times, but in all his years of outlawry he had never spoken of his past. His big, bony hand had a way of caressing the worn, black-butted six-shooter at his hip when he gave an order. And, despite his years, men knew there was a lot of fight still left in Jake Kane.

"Much more of this settin' around an' yuh'll be so stiff we'll have to carry yuh to yore horse, Kane," Utah taunted.

Patiently, Utah was baiting Jake Kane. Blackie Yates, a hulking, pale-eyed bank robber, got to his feet. "Shut up, Utah!" he snapped.

Lee Tipton and Blackie Yates watched, feeling the mounting tension, and sat waiting. Anger rose in Jake Kane, a burning, fierce hate for Utah, who was belittling him. But in the passing years he had learned to control the wild fires of his passions.

Old Jake turned slowly, a dark shadow. His right hand was on the gun-butt. There was no mumbling or crazy talk now. His voice was flat, chill. "This is my last job, boys. With the payroll tonight we'll have enough to split an' take life easy. Yuh can have my job then, Utah. Or you can go to blazes."

They heard the train then, the puffing, snorting little Mexican engine pulling its load up an incline. A chill, unlike anything he'd ever known, shot through old Jake Kane. As the men got quickly to their feet he spoke, his voice menacing.

"All right, boys. Yuh know what yuh're to do. Lee, you an' Blackie take the caboose. Utah, you an' me will handle the hombres in the engine. Don't shoot to kill unless yuh have to. The payroll orter be in the middle coach. We'll meet there."

Jake Kane was thinking fast tonight. But he wasn't as fast as the other men in mounting. Every muscle of his big-boned frame ached. The rigors and strain of this wild life was telling on him.

Blackie Yates and Utah rode out of the rocky slot first. The young outlaw, Lee Tipton, hung behind. He was the kid of the bunch, and somehow he'd cottoned to old Jake Kane. He spoke so the others couldn't hear, his voice a warning.

"Send Blackie an' Utah to the engine, Kane. Let's you an' me take the caboose. An' keep yore eyes peeled for trouble."

Old Jake Kane had the feeling he could trust the kid. They eased their horses around the boulders and brush to a point near the track. The approaching train was rounding a small bend on the upgrade, its engine headlight spearing a yellow beam through the black night. There were only the engine, tender, one coach and a caboose.

Jake Kane drew his six-shooter. In the inky darkness he sat tensely in the saddle.

"Wait till she passes, boys," he said, his voice shaking a little. "Blackie, you an' Utah will take the engine instead of the way I first had it. Lee an' I will grab the caboose."

"Damn you, Kane," Utah said thickly.

"Hold it, Utah!" Blackie snarled. "Here she is!"

THEY drew back into the shadows as the engine headlight beam flashed beyond them. The engine, hissing and puffind, its piston arms pounding, went past. The engineer was at his window, peering ahead. The Mexican fireman, shoveling coal into the open fire-box, had his back turned.

No light showed at the windows of the middle coach. The caboose was dark except for the red tail lights. Somehow Jake Kane sensed that things weren't right. His face was suddenly clammy and he was cold all over. But as the engine and tender grated slowly past he rapped:

"Let's go!"

Horses' hoofs beat into the gravel as Blackie Yates and Utah spurred toward the engine. Jake Kane and the kid spurred toward the caboose. Somewhere a rifle roared. Above the rattle of train wheels and pound of hoofs, a Mexican's voice rose in shrill command. From atop the middle coach prone figures suddenly came to life, crouching and firing.

In that wild melee of shooting and yelling, old Jake Kane knew his outlaw crew had ridden into a trap. High above the confusion rose Utah's cursing as he wheeled his horse and bolted off into the darkness. Blackie Yates and his horse were down, bullet-riddled in that first hail of lead. Jake Kane, his six-shooter blaring a retort, his brain afire, yelled at the kid and spur-jabbed his spooked horse toward the fringe of brush and boulders.

"Run, Lee!" he bellowed. "For heaven's sake . . . . run!"

The kid was bent low in the kak, shooting back as the Mexicans swarmed down off the stopped train. Jake Kane was at his side, riding hell-for-leather and cursing the fate that had tricked them. And by some miracle they lived, plunging on through the darkness until the scene of the fiasco was miles behind.

Where the tumbled, canyon-gashed hills dipped down into the broad expanse of Diablo Desert in Chihuahua, Jake Kane and the kid guided their jaded horses down a winding trail into a box canyon. It was a wild land, abounding in pasture and wild game.

Here in the high desert willow and mesquite, Jake Kane had built his hideout shack. At various times, over the years, he had taken refuge here, safe from Texas or Mexican law. Many times the outlaw crew had met here, biding their time until another foray.

It was a small shack of logs and 'dobe, hidden away in the brush. There was a horse corral behind, and a spring. It was a crudely furnished shack with an open fireplace, a lantern and a few cooking utensils. But it had been the only place that Jake Kane could call home.

There was a tragic hopelessness about the old outlaw as he reined up in front of the shack. In the breaking dawn his weather-beaten face was pale with fatigue. He looked a long time at the kid called Lee Tipton. He tried to keep his mind clear, but a strange, jumbled past kept crowding up around him.

"I failed at my last job, Lee," he said queerly.

Lee Tipton grinned. He was only a kid in his early twenties, a clean-cut looking youth without the tough swagger of the out-trail upon him. There were no crimes along his backtrail. Kane knew that he was an orphan kid who had joined his outfit six months ago simply to satisfy a wild yen for adventure and excitement. He had level eyes and brown hair. His runover boots and faded denims could mark him for a cowhand fighting through a streak of bad luck.

"It wasn't your fault, Jake," he said. "Forget it. Now what's the deal?"

"I'd like for yuh to stick with me a while longer, Lee. The biggest chore in my life is comin' up. An' I need yore help."

"I'll stick, Jake," the kid said quietly. "Blackie is dead, but Utah's alive. My guess is he'll show up soon. When he does yuh'd best shoot first."

"I'll handle Utah, Lee," Jake said heavily. "Let's go inside."

There was a dull ache in Jake Kane's heart when he went inside the shack. He

was positive now that he could trust the kid. He needed the kid's help. After the chore ahead was done he hoped he could send the kid on his way—straight!

It wasn't in Jake Kane's book to preach morals to anyone—his own example was a pattern to avoid. He wondered at times if his regrets and memories hadn't driven him a little loco. There were times, like now, when Jake Kane lived in a dead past. Fantasy held sway over reality, and he imagined things. Memory is a treacherous thing, and it had done something to big Jake Kane.

Lee Tipton tended to the horses. Jake Kane went inside the shack alone. Early morning sunlight streamed in through the single window as he sat down at a crude table. From his shirt pocket he produced a folded letter, frayed and sweat-stained. His big hands shook a little as he unfolded the message. For the hundredth time he re-read each word with the stumbling slowness of a man aware of his lagging memory.

Dear Jeff: It was nice hearing from you after so long a time, and I am glad that you have given up the cattle business in Mexico and are moving back to Texas. The ranch you spoke of buying outside of River Bend sounds wonderful, Jeff. I am sure we will be happy there, you and Lucy and I. Lucy will be like your own child, for I have told her so much about you.

We can be married when we arrive, which will be June 1. It will take me until then to close up my personal affairs here in Tucson. I am sending this note to Parral, Mexico, as you directed. God bless you, Jeff, and hurry the day until we meet again.

Love

Martha

Very tenderly, Jake Kane put the letter back in his pocket. He didn't look up as Lee Tipton entered the shack. For Jake Kane was remembering a lovely, blue-eyed girl with blond hair. She had promised to marry Jake—only his name was Jeff Bentley then. He had loved Martha Howell with all the deep, abiding devotion a man could hold for a wholesome young girl.

With a tight, queer feeling in his throat, Jake Kane remembered the night of the fight in Ocate town. He'd always been wild and reckless. But actually if he'd stayed and faced the trouble nothing would have come of it. Instead, Jake Kane fled from Arizona. But he'd never forgotten Martha Howell.

It was all a little jumbled in Jake Kane's mind: the fights and wild nights of outlawry in Mexico, the passing years, the everlasting, haunting memory of the blue-eyed, blond-haired girl; the changing of his name from Jeff Bentley to Jake Kane —to hide the shame and disgrace. Word had finally reached him of Martha Howell's marriage to another man. It seemed to tear something loose inside of Jake Kane.

Then, two years ago, Kane heard through the grapevine that Martha and her child were left alone. It took all the courage Jake had to write Martha from Mexico. Every lie he told her cut him deep, but he was clinging to fading dreams. He struggled to smother his biting conscience; he lived for Martha alone, her happiness. He forgot the years that had lapsed. He lived for his illusion with all the fanatical tenacity an aging man can know.

"Something went wrong with the hold-up last night, Jake," Lee Tipton said quietly. "What happened?"

OLD JAKE KANE came back to ugly reality. He shook his head vaguely. "I don't know, Lee. Maybe I talked out of turn while I was hangin' around the cantinas in Carrizo. Maybe I let something slip an' word got back to the mines what we intended to do."

"Blackie an' Utah were close friends, Jake. Utah will kill you if he gets a chance."

Jake Kane got to his feet, his eyes glowing feverishly. "Utah will never find me, Lee. I'm goin' to tell yuh things I've never told anybody else, and I want yuh to help me, son. I'm leavin' the out-trail an' I'm takin' you with me. It don't pay, Lee."

"You can't quit now, Jake," Lee Tipton said softly. "Every lawman along the border has got a reward poster with your picture on it."

"Nobody will recognize me, Lee. What month is this?"

"April."

"I'm goin' to get married, Lee. Martha's her name. She's a beautiful girl."

"A—girl?"

Old Jake Kane, his gray hair silvery in the sunlight, looked away uneasily. Vague recollections moved through his brain, like tender fingers cautiously probing his

memory. "I guess she's not a girl anymore, Lee. Funny how time slips by. Funny."

"Yuh'd better forget her, Jake."

Old Jake Kane whirled, eyes blazing, his old fighting self again. Then his shoulders slumped as he saw the faint grin on the kid's lips. "I didn't mean to fly off like that, Lee," he muttered.

"Forget it, Jake."

"Here—read this."

Jake Kane handed the folded letter to Lee Tipton. And the kid carefully read it. As he handed it back to the old renegade the two men's eyes met and held. Lee Tipton's tanned face was hard.

"I figgered something was worryin' yuh, Jake," he said.

"Yuh're the only man in the world that I'd let read that, Lee."

"Why would yuh lie to a good woman like that, Jake?"

"You don't understand, kid."

Jake Kane suddenly felt cheap and small. He wanted to tell the kid of his hopes and dreams, but he knew it would be futile. He didn't see the pity in the youth's eyes. He didn't know he was living in a world of half-darkness, half-light. And he was talking, his whole fantastic scheme tumbling from him like a confession.

"It's not a lie, Lee. My hands are not clean, but if I can go back to Martha I'll make up for it. I'm not a Godly man, kid, but I askin' you—an' God—to help me now. I've been blind as a bat. I know it now. But maybe it's not too late to change. Maybe I can still find a little happiness for Martha an' me. I figgered I needed my pay-off share of the holdup last night to do what I've planned. But I don't."

Jake Kane's mind was suddenly clear. He was doing some of the sharpest thinking in his life. He wasn't wheedling or begging for help. He was looking at the kid, laying the cards on the table, his voice flat.

"Forget what I just said, Lee. Yuh're still one of my renegade bunch—the only one I can trust. I'll pay yuh well to play out one more hand. When it's done, yuh can go yore way an' I'll go mine. I've got money buried here in this shack. It's honest money—money I made buyin' an' sellin' cattle in Sonora before I hit the outlaw trail. Yuh're takin' it an' headin' for River Bend, Texas. The law don't want you. You'll be safe.

"There's a ranch just east of town that's for sale. Yuh're to buy it, Lee. In my name—Jeff Bentley. Yuh'll meet Martha and her girl Lucy when they get in June first. Tell them yuh're my foreman. Yuh'll have enough money to buy a few cattle. Tell them that I'm still in Mexico on a cattle deal, but will be back any day. Make friends with the sheriff an' see if it'll be safe for me to return. Then get word to me here."

"Yuh're crazy, Jake," Lee Tipton said honestly.

Old Jake Kane grinned crookedly. "I sometimes think that myself, Lee. But this is one deal that's goin' through as planned. Shoot square with me an' I'll pay yuh well. Double-cross me—or let the truth slip—an' yuh'll wish yuh was in Hades!"

Reckless, devil-may-care Lee Tipton had all the finer qualities of manhood—once given a chance. This blunt-nosed handsome youth loved a long-shot gamble. He thought a lot of the aging old renegade boss, whose mind suffered lapses of memory.

"When do yuh want me to go, Jake?" he asked.

"Tonight," said Old Jake Kane.

Lee Tipton rode toward the little cowtown of River Bend that night with enough money to buy a modest ranch and some cattle. Jake Kane stayed behind at the hide-out shack, his every thought engrossed with memories that should long ago have been dead.

Over the open fireplace Kane cooked a cottontail that he had killed that afternoon. There were wild berries, game and water in the hide-out basin—enough supplies to tide him over for a couple of months. The night was warm and thunder reverberated between the hills, hinting of rain.

Kane was never conscious of the lone rider pulling up in the inky darkness near the open plank door. The furtive crunch of a boot heel just outside the shack jerked him to his feet, right hand stabbing to the black-butted six-shooter at his hip. Then he froze as a man's voice lashed out of the shadows at him.

"Hold it, Kane! Make another move an'

I'll blast yuh apart before yuh have a chance to talk."

Very slowly Kane's hand came away from his gun as Utah stepped into the doorway. There was a leveled six-shooter in the tall outlaw's fist. His denims and boots were gray with dust. Beneath the brim of his big hat his eyes were burning red dots of hate.

"You alone, Kane?" he snarled.

As if in a daze, Kane replied, "I'm alone."

"Where's Tipton?"

"He's gone."

UTAH eased farther into the room, kicking shut the door at his back. His lips were pulled back over teeth that shone yellowly in the lantern light. And into Kane's shocked brain came the realization that Utah meant to kill him. Too late now he remembered Lee Tipton's warning.

"Yore blasted blunderin' caused Blackie to be killed last night, Kane," Utah was saying. "Somehow yuh let it slip what we planned to do."

"I guess so," Kane admitted, stalling.

"I'm goin' to kill yuh for that, Kane. Blackie was a pal of mine. But before the shootin' yuh're goin' to tell me where you got yore money buried around here. There's no use lyin', Kane. Yuh've got it here."

"I gave it to Tipton," Kane said.

The tall outlaw scowled, cocking his six-shooter. "Start talkin', Kane. It'll be a lot easier for yuh."

Big Jake Kane stood trembling like a man with ague, his whole body bathed in a cold sweat. Hatred seared his heart and made his black eyes cold and bitter. It was not fear of dying that shook him. He had been a saddle-mate with death too long to know that kind of fear. Rather, in that fleeting instant, he saw in Utah all the evil and crime he was trying to get away from. He saw Utah, the killer, standing between himself and Martha Howell—smashing his dreams, crushing every fragile hope he'd ever clung to.

In that storm of hate and bitterness, Jake Kane cursed Utah. Then in a frenzied burst of speed he went for his gun. Thunder boomed in the night outside, blending with the roar of Utah's six-shooter. Kane felt no pain. It seemed to him as if the room exploded in front of his eyes.

In one ghastly heart-tick he felt himself jolted backward, as if from a mighty blow. Then he was pitching downward into blackness. In a nightmare of agony he thought he heard Martha Howell's fading voice, pleading with him.

After that it was one recurring nightmare after another for Jake Kane. From the clutching darkness he drifted into semi-consciousness. His head throbbed to the hammer-strokes of horrible pain. He tried to breathe deeply but the knifelike hurt in his chest was too much. With a low moan he slumped back into blessed darkness.

Sunlight through the open doorway blinded Jake Kane when he opened his eyes again. Too weak and sick to move, he lay still, trying to recall all that had happened. He was lying on the dirt floor of the deserted shack. All around him the floor had been dug up. Utah, he knew, had tried to find his gold, and failed. Then, thinking Jake Kane was dead, he had left.

Kane's mouth was parched, his tongue swollen. Pain flowed through him like streamers of fire as he moved one arm. Clenching his teeth, he glanced down at his shirt front. It was a dried smear of blood and dust. One of Utah's bullets had put a gash in the side of his head; the other bullet had gone through his shoulder, breaking the collar bone.

Very slowly, Kane began squirming toward the door. Only a man obsessed with a mania to live could have kept going. Inch by inch, foot by foot, he got through the door and outside. Twice he fainted before he finally managed to reach the tiny spring in the horse corral at the rear of the shack.

Once at the spring, Kane wallowed in the mud, slowly sating the awful thirst that deviled him. The cold water felt good against his feverish body. It was a long time before his hands unclenched and the trembling left his nerves. Hunger and weakness were like monsters inside him, but he could find the strength to move no farther.

Darkness came and he lay still, staring dully up at the stars. In damning helplessness he listened to the night sounds. In the darkness he thought he saw Mar-

tha Howell coming toward him. There were tears in her eyes as she kept repeating, "Jeff! Jeff!" She was wearing the checked gingham dress she's been wearing the last time he'd seen her. Her honey-colored hair framed the beauty of her face. As she knelt beside him, Kane felt the touch of her soft hands.

"I'll not die, Martha," he whispered. "I'll live to make you a good husband."

More dead than alive, he awoke some time near dawn. In tortured agony he began dragging himself back to the cabin. The sun was high when he finally pulled himself inside. Near the cold ashes in the fireplace he found parts of the cooked rabbit. He gnawed the flesh and sucked the bone.

Fate played a strange hand in keeping him alive. That night he found the strength to crawl back out to the corral. His ribby horse was still there, half starved for feed. By sheer force of will, Kane got to his feet, clutching the animal's mane for support. He slipped on a hackamore; then after several attempts, he got astride.

Slumped over the horse's neck, clinging to the last spark of consciousness, Kane rode out of the basin that night. Every fiber of his being strained for sleep, for rest. But he kept going, trusting solely to the animal's own will.

There were hours when Kane knew nothing. Then moments of semi-lucidity when he was dimly aware of pain and the movement of the horse. When, at dawn, the horse drew up near a Mexican goat-herder's lonely shack in some sand dunes, Kane fell limply to the ground.

When the goat-herding *viejo* reached him, Kane looked up out of sunken, dazed eyes.

"I must not die," he said in Spanish. "You will care for me?"

"I will do all I can," the Mexican said simply. "Whether you live or not is up to the gods."

"Martha," said Jake Kane in a whisper, "will be waiting."

THE June night spread a silvery haze of moonlight over the little cowtown of River Bend, there at the top of the Big Bend. Lamplight glimmered at the windows of the store fronts along the single main street. Saddled horses stood at the hitch-rack in front of the Bull's Head Saloon. Beyond the center of town the 'dobe homes stood one after the other, reaching out to where the brush began.

No one noticed the lone rider enter town from the direction of the river. His jaded horse moved with the slow persistency of destiny. In front of one of the stores he pulled up, staring out of sunken eyes at the lights—a great, grizzled giant of a man, whose faded denims hung on his gaunt frame like the garments of a scarecrow.

Awkwardly, he slipped to the ground and entered a small restaurant. In the doorway he paused a moment, accustoming his eyes to the lamplight.

The man who had once defied the laws of God and man had been a big, hard-muscled two hundred pounder. A black-haired youth, good natured and swaggering.

There was nothing about this shambling human wreck who stood in the doorway that resembled the big Jake Kane of years ago. The sloppy black hat on his head failed to hide his long white hair. There was no laughter in his eyes; only puzzlement and a staring vacancy. Retribution had caught up with Jake Kane. It had scarred his heart and maimed his mind.

"I'm hungry," he told the girl behind the counter.

She stared. Then from a stool a man came forward—a square-jawed man with level eyes and a star on his vest. He guided Jake Kane to one of the stools.

"Sit down, oldtimer," he said softly. Then to the girl: "Fetch him the best steak in the house, Mary—an' all the trimmin's!"

Jake Kane ate slowly of the food that was brought him, paying no heed to the stares he drew. The lawman remained at his side, drinking coffee. Another man came up to the lawman's side, leaned over.

"That stranger is in the Bull's Head Saloon askin' for trouble, Ike. Better come on down."

The lawman nodded, and the man left. Jake Kane, finished with his meal, turned when the sheriff spoke to him.

"Had enough, oldtimer?"

"Yes," said Kane. "It was mighty good."

The sheriff smiled. "Just get into town?"

Jake Kane nodded.

"Plan to stay?"

Jake Kane tried to wipe the fog from his mind, but it was no use. It seemed odd, people being kind to him. Something frozen and stifled inside him seemed to thaw a little. By heavy concentration he recalled the deal he had made with Lee Tipton.

"Why, yes, I plan to stay here, Sheriff," he said mildly. "See, some time back my foreman come here an' bought a ranch."

"What's his name?"

Jake Kane thought a long time. "Why—Lee Tipton."

"Yes, I've met young Tipton," the lawman said slowly.

"He's my foreman," said Jake Kane.

They talked some more, and Jake Kane never sensed what the strange-acting lawman was doing. It never occurred to him that the lawman might recognize him. He told the sheriff his name was Jeff Bentley, and that he was returning to ranching.

"Been down in Mexico on some cattle deals," he said.

"You know the girl out at the ranch?"

Jake Kane's eyes brightened momentarily. "I been expecting her," he said. "We plan to be married. Martha an' I have figgered on this meetin' a long time. This is June, ain't it?"

"This is September, Bentley," the lawman said softly. "Your place is three miles east of town, alongside the road. You'd best go on out there. I'll be out later tonight."

"We'd feel mighty proud to have you, Sheriff," Jake Kane murmured.

After the sheriff had left, Jake Kane fumbled around in his frayed denim pockets for some coins. When the waitress told him his check had already been paid, he said: "Why, thank you, ma'am."

He shuffled back out to his horse and mounted. Boot heels clumped along the walk, and in the darkness people spoke to one another, as they do in friendly little cowtowns. Old Jake Kane smiled, listening, and imagining that he was part of this little community. He'd always wanted to settle down in a place like this.

"Martha will like it here," he thought. Folks will take her in and we'll be one of them."

Then into his clouded mind drifted the thought that he was an outlaw, and there were crimes stacked against him, and when the sheriff learned that he was Jake Kane the whole deal would blow up in his face.

Jake Kane frowned as he walked his horse down the street. The muted undertone of the town was only a buzzing in his ears. As he passed the Bull's Head Saloon the batwing doors slapped open. Several men stood there in the patch of light. There was some shouting and angry, profane talk. But Jake Kane rode on, never turning his head, for he was living with his dreams. And Martha Howell, he thought, would be waiting for him.

In front of the saloon, Sheriff Ike Riley had a drunk by the collar. The man was pointing to the disappearing figure of Jake Kane, mumbling things about him.

"Lock him up, Ike!" the fat-bellied barkeep was shouting. "We don't want his kind in River Bend.

Sheriff Ike Riley took the man's guns and quickly jerked him toward the jail. Redheaded Ike Riley was a lawman of the old school, honest and tough as the day is long. But he was no bounty hunter, and his sense of fair play had kept him in office in Brewster County for over twenty years. Folks liked Ike Riley and often told stories of how he took the law into his own hands when the occasion demanded.

Ike Riley kept a record in his office of everything he did. In his files he had posters of every wanted man along the border. He had fetched law and order to River Bend, and that is the way he intended to keep it. But there were times this poker-playin', redheaded old lawman took great satisfaction in settling things his own way.

The tipsy, snarling man he shoved into his front office was a big, black-haired, black-eyed man in his early thirties. He stood head and shoulders above Ike Riley. His beady little eyes were bloodshot, shifty. There was the mark of the outtrail upon him as plainly as a brand upon a cow. As Ike Riley pushed him into a chair the man cursed belligerently.

"Take your hands off of me, blast yuh!" he snarled. "I'm just tryin' to help the law, that's all. When I passed the restaurant a while ago I seen yuh talkin' to that white-haired old codger. I wanted to tell yuh then who he was, but I didn't have a chance. That man's got a bounty on his

head. Know who he is?"

"Who?" asked Ike Riley mildly.

The man's bloodshot eyes moved shiftily. "Jake Kane!" he blurted. "An' I want half the reward for spottin' him!"

"How did yuh know him?" Ike Riley asked softly.

"I—I saw him in Mexico once."

"What's yore name?"

"Luke Johnson."

A FAINT grin of contempt touched the lawman's lips. As the out-trailer started to get to his feet, Ike Riley knocked him back into the chair.

"Utah, I'll have my say now. Go for that hide-out knife in yore boot an' I'll kill yuh. I spotted yuh as Utah Bledsoe when yuh hit town two weeks ago. We've had enough of yore loud talk an' boastin' how tough yuh are. You murdered an honest rancher up in New Mexico an' attacked his wife. Then yuh joined Jake Kane's renegade outfit in Old Mexico. Since yuh've been here in River Bend yuh've tried to cause trouble for Lee Tipton. I've been playin' my own cards, close watchin' yuh, Bledsoe."

Utah Bledsoe stared out of red, hate-filled eyes and knew he was trapped. He had a knife in his boot. He also had a snub-nosed .44 pistol in an arm holster that the lawman hadn't found. He'd use it when the odds were all in his favor.

"Yuh've got me, Sheriff," he whined. "But all I'm askin' is that yuh grab Jake Kane. You orter make it easy on me if I help yuh take him."

"Afraid of Kane, Utah?"

"I'm not afraid of no one!" the renegade snarled.

Ike Riley grinned coldly. "We'll see, Utah. I'll get a couple of the boys an' take you along with us out to the ranch. There's a few things I want to get straight tonight."

Big Jake Kane rode with strange, distorted memories along the dark, brush-hemmed wagon road to the east of River Bend. At his hip, beneath the ancient brush-jacket, was his old black-butted six-shooter.

As he topped a rise in the road he saw the lighted windows of the little ranch house off in the mesquite. Behind it were some dark outbuildings, a corral and a windmill. It was just as Jake Kane had pictured it. He couldn't account for the hard, aching lump in his throat.

He pulled off into the brush, dismounting near the ranch house galley. Slowly, he walked up to the door. As if in a dream he saw the curtains at the front windows. Inside the house he heard voices—the voice of a girl, gentle and soft and rich with laughter. Lee Tipton was talking to her, saying things that didn't make sense to Jake Kane.

Jake Kane lifted a trembling hand and knocked. When the door opened he saw her then. She was framed in the block of lamplight, a beautiful image that Jake Kane had seen so often in his dreams. Her yellow hair was like spun gold; her eyes were as blue as the Texas sky.

Jake Kane had his hat in his hand as he stepped inside the room. If he saw Lee Tipton in the room he gave no sign, for his eyes were for the girl alone. And through tears that came unheeded, Jake Kane was smiling. His lips were moving, repeating over and over again:

"Martha—Martha."

He didn't see the quick exchange of glances that passed between the girl and Lee Tipton. It was all blurry to Jake Kane. When the girl came into his outstretched arms she was crying a little, guiding him to a chair. Then Lee Tipton was beside him, and after a time it occurred to Jake Kane that something was wrong.

"What happened to you, Jake?" Tipton was saying quietly. "I went back to the shack, but you were gone."

"Utah came after yuh left, Lee. He tried to kill me. But I lived. I had to live—"

"Jake."

"Yes, Lee?"

"I want yuh to live here with us, Jake. Maybe everything will work out all right. You see, Jake, yuh're sick, but maybe Lucy an' I can get yuh well."

Jake Kane turned his eyes towards Lee Tipton for the first time. "Lucy?" he asked dully. "Lucy. Why—"

"This is Lucy, Jake," Tipton said gently. "Not her mother Martha. Lucy came here alone. Her mother died shortly after yuh got that letter, and Lucy was unable to reach yuh by letter. She wanted yuh to know, Jake. I've told her all about us, so there's nothin' to hide. Lucy an' I were

married two months ago."

Jake Kane heard the two young people trying to explain. He sat staring, his huge bony fingers fumbling with his hat. It took time for the truth to seep into his mind. He saw the happiness in the eyes of the two young people; he saw the regret and pity. And Jake Kane didn't like pity.

"I think I understand," he said queerly.

Lucy's lips were trembling. She was on her knees at his feet, her heart bursting with emotions. "We want you to stay with us, Uncle Jeff. Mother loved you as dearly as you loved her. This ranch is yours—"

"It's yores an' Lee's, Lucy," said Jake Kane.

THEY heard the riders pull up outside then, and intuitive fingers of fear clutched at Jake Kane's heart. It seemed that his brain cleared, and every detail in the room was sharp. Lee Tipton's face was pale, but there was no fear there. Only the haunting knowledge of uncertainty that the out-trail breeds.

Lee Tipton's right hand was on his holstered six-shooter. "Utah is in town, Jake," he said, his voice level. "He might have seen you ride through."

"Lee!" came Sheriff Riley's voice from the yard.

Lucy's eyes were stark with terror. She seemed to feel the threat of death.

"Lee, don't go out!" she cried.

But Lee Tipton was halfway to the door Kane's voice was flat and commanding as of old as he spoke. "I'll go, Lee," he said.

Then Jake Kane was out the door, a great, stoop-shouldered figure in the block of light. He saw the four riders in the fringe of lamp-glow, caught the glint of a star on Ike Riley's shirt front.

"Yes, Sheriff?" he said queerly.

And then he saw Utah, the killer, bloodshot eyes glowing with fear and hate. Ike Riley and the other two riders didn't see the frantic gesture that Utah made for his hide-out gun. In one desperate showdown the renegade meant to shoot his way out.

"Utah!" Old Jake Kane cried hoarsely.

Death rang the signal bell and six-shooters roared their requiem of hate. It was all part of the same fantastic nightmare to Jake Kane, but somehow he felt a surge of wild elation as the gun in his big fist crashed. He had shot—and shot to kill—and Utah's bullet had hit the dirt at his feet.

Startled shouts mingled with the echoes of gun-thunder as the lawman and his companions filled their hands. But Jake Kane was watching Utah Bledsoe tumble from the back of his spooked horse. Utah was dead, Jake Kane knew. He had settled his score with Utah. The rest of the old Jake Kane outlaw crew were dead. No man alive now could testify against Lee Tipton.

Jake Kane's knees buckled from exhaustion alone. Then he was conscious of Lucy bending over him, sobbing, "Uncle Jeff! Uncle Jeff!" Sheriff Riley and his men were down off their horses, talking to Lee Tipton.

After they had carried Jake Kane inside the house, it was Ike Riley who did most of the talking. "Boys," he said quietly, taking a folded reward poster from his pocket, "that dead jigger out there is Big Jake Kane. This dodger describes him perfectly. I'd know the big, black-haired renegade anyplace. Load him on a horse an' we'll take the body to town. That's the end of the Big Jake Kane gang."

No one ever questioned Ike Riley's authority. He knew good horses and men and knew how to keep a secret. What he never revealed was that during their few month's friendship, blunt-nosed, likeable Lee Tipton had confessed everything to him. Nor did Ike Riley ever let it be known that the reward dodger he carried with him that night was over twenty years old.

When Ike Riley and his men left that night, both Lee Tipton and Lucy told Jake Kane that he was going to share the ranch with them. They figured they could make his last days happy ones. And Jake Kane knew they meant it.

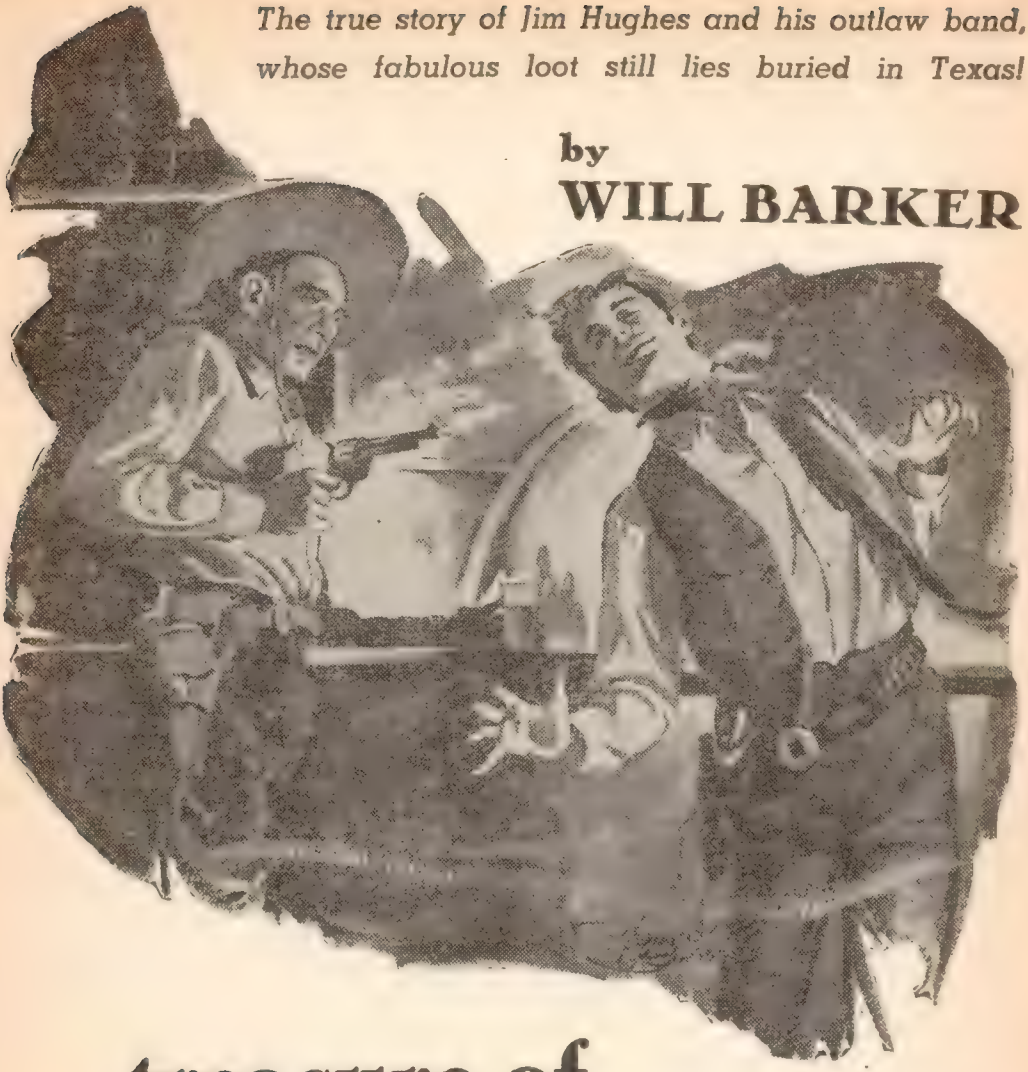
"You'll like it here, Uncle Jeff," Lucy whispered.

Old Jake Kane was too choked up for much talk. All he said was, "I'm sure I will—Lucy."

Next Issue's Novel: RIDERS OF THE SHADOW TRAIL, by D. B. Newton

The true story of Jim Hughes and his outlaw band, whose fabulous loot still lies buried in Texas!

by
WILL BARKER



treasure of EL MUERTO SPRINGS

THE grisly proverb adopted by Jim Hughes and his murderous companions was *Los Muertos no hablan* —The dead do not talk. And at least one hundred and forty-two men met violent death because these Southwestern badmen lived by this dictum.

The first wholesale murders by Hughes and his gang took place in 1879. Fort Davis, established in the Davis Mountains of Texas in 1854, had fallen into disuse during the Civil War. But in the year in which Victorio and his Apache followers went on the rampage, it was rebuilt. A detachment of Cavalry was assigned to the post.

And Cavalry meant horses. And horses, of course, meant fodder.

A work detail of ninety-nine Negroes, under the command of a young white lieutenant, was sent to the fertile Van Horn Valley to cut the toboso grass which grew there in great quantities. The work went well and there were no interruptions, so the young lieutenant, fresh from the United States Military Academy at West Point, had plenty of time to think about the Southwest, of which he had heard so much.

Texas, he thought, was certainly peaceful. All the stories he'd been told, about badman, murdering Indians or Mexican banditry were nothing more than fabrications to scare a tenderfoot.

Why not even the notorious Mexican bandit, Juan Estrada, and his band of nineteen desperadoes, had put in an appearance in a long while. Those stories that he and his men dressed themselves like Apaches and plundered the country of the Big Bend were probably just so many old wives tales.

Lieutenant Supervises Crew

The lieutenant glanced over his work crew to see that no one was soldiering on the job. Satisfied that his boys were doing their job as they should, he went on with his musings about the Southwest. Of course, Tombstone might be as bad as they said it was. There were four outlaws, and Americans at that, who were supposed to have run wild over there.

These four, Jim Hughes, Zwing Hunt, Red Curley and Doctor Neal were real bad men if you could believe all that you heard. But the lieutenant was skeptical. He'd been in Texas several months now, and it was almost as peaceful as the parade ground back at West Point. No badmen had come around to shoot up Fort Davis. But then no outlaws would be foolhardy enough to attack a United States Military Reservation.

The lieutenant was wrong, however. And he learned that he was mistaken almost at once.

Guns suddenly crashed, shattering the mid-morning hush.

Before the young officer's startled eyes, his Negro workers were mowed down like the grass which they had been cutting for the last weeks. Then before he could collect himself from his wool-gathering, the ground seemed to sprout armed men, like the field in which Cadmus had sown the dragon's teeth.

The young West Pointer, rooted to the spot, had only a minute to glance around, before guns again thundered, and he, too, pitched forward, to join his work detail upon the ground, his straight young body riddled by bullets.

And then even before death had completely stilled the hundred murdered men, their killers were in among them. Fingers, which so shortly before, had pulled triggers, now rifled the dead men's pockets, and helped themselves to the detachment's supplies in the nearby camp.

Ammunition, provisions, horseshoes, saddles and other goods were stolen. Next twenty-five of the very best mules were cut out from the herd to serve as mounts for the desperadoes who had killed the young West Pointer, the boy-officer who had learned minutes before his murder that the Southwest was just as bad as he had heard.

Then, without looking around at their victims, the twenty-four men who had made the attack on the unsuspecting Americans rode off, headed south for Mexico. After fording the Rio Grande, they stopped, and held a council of war.

Five Outlaws Confer

Those in the council were Juan Estrada, whom the lieutenant had thought no longer rode the bandit's trail, and the four badmen whom he had heard helped to make Tombstone the notorious city it was.

Jim Hughes, Zwing Hunt, Red Curly and Doctor Neal had met Estrada and his nineteen Mexican followers somewhere, and had consolidated with it. And it was this consolidation, for the purposes of looting, which resulted in the deaths of so many men, unfortunate enough to cross the gang's path.

At the council of war, Hughes and Estrada decided to go to Monterrey, home of the national mint and the government smelters. In order to make a good impression upon their arrival they stopped at the bat caves, a day's ride from the Presidio del Norte crossing of the Rio Grande. There they filled sacks with guano. Their mules so loaded, they went on to Monterrey, and quickly disposed of the guano at

a hundred dollars a ton.

This deal established the Fort Davis murderers as honest traders. Thus with a good reputation in Monterrey, and money in their pockets from the guano sale, they set up camp on the outskirts of the city. There they opened up a monte game, which usually payed off in favor of the players.

It was soon noised around Monterrey that there was a monte game in town which could be beaten. And every peon in the city was anxious to try his hand. Many came, including a few Mexican soldiers. But still the faces that Hughes and Estrada wished to show up at their camp never put in an appearance. So they decided on a strategem, but did not put into practice until the mules were well rested. Then they sent out decoys who were to approach the g u a r d s of the mint and smelter.

"Free *tequila,*" one of the bandits would mutter to a lonely sentinel. "And," he'd add, "they say the banker over at Hughes' camp is losing his shirt."

That combination—free *tequila* and a losing bank—always did the trick. One by one, the twelve guards of the mint and smelter quit their posts, and slipped into camp.

They were almost at once the victims of the gang's proverb—*Los muertos no hablan!*

While the guards were being murdered by one group of the Hughes-Estrada gang, another lot burglarized the mint, and looted the cathedral. Then, somewhat later, the two groups met, and packed their blood-tainted swag on the twenty-five stolen mules, and set out on the long trip back to the Davis Mountains.

They were through in Mexico forever, and knew it.

Take Loot to Texas

It was three hundred and some odd miles from Monterrey, Mexico to their planned hideout at El Muerto Springs in Jeff Davis County, Texas. And they made the trek without once taking the loads off their richly burdened mules.

Knowing that they were sure to be followed, once the looted mint and sacked cathedral were discovered, the outlaws crossed the Rio Grande at the mouth of Reagan Canyon, instead of at the more popular crossing at the Presidio del Norte. Thus they escaped from Mexico into the United States without being seen, though they had split into two parties as a precautionary measure, once they got over the River.

The four Americans, with one half of the pack train, got to El Muerto Springs first. This was e x a c t l y as they had planned, and unfortunate for the Mexicans.

As the *muleros,* with Juan Estrada at their head, rode up, Hughes and his three fellow murderers cut loose with rifle and six-shooter. The Mexicans were mowed down in turn as they had mowed down the unsuspecting work detail back at Fort Davis some months before. One, however, who was only knocked from his horse, managed to grab up a machete. He hurled it at Swing Hunt, and inflicted a severe wound, and then was killed by spraying lead from outlaw guns which kept on until not one of the Estrada gang lived.

The record was twenty men killed in almost as many minutes!

When the massacre was over, Hunt's companions carried him to a cave overlooking El Muerto Springs. As soon as they had the wounded outlaw settled, they set to work, and buried the Monterrey plunder in a twelve-foot hole near the cave. Next they fenced the mules in, by placing a brush fence across the mouth of a fertile little canyon. And, finally, after providing Hunt with food and water, the three unwounded men rode off on some mysterious errand of their own.

Hughes, Red Curly and Doctor Neal returned in a couple of weeks. They found Hunt nearly well, and with a report that eight days after the murderous attack on Estrada and his gang, a detachment of Mexican cavalry had ridden into the valley. And, after burying the slain men in stone crypts, the detachment had ridden off, apparently satisfied that the theives had fallen out and annihilated each other.

"They didn't even look for the loot!" Hunt said.

Now feeling completely safe from further pursuit, Hughes and his partners in crime, decided to take a little *pasear* to El Paso. This trip developed into a long one mainly devoted to further criminal activities.

First, they held up a train at Tombstone in the spring of '81. A mail clerk was killed in the holdup, and the amount they took from the safe, after blowing it open, was so vast that the railway officials would never say how much it was.

Slay Man and Son

Then, in order to have transportation for this last haul, they killed a man and his son who were riding in a wagon, drawn by a two-horse team. With the swag from the railroad holdup loaded into the wagon, Hughes, Red Curley, Doctor Neal and Zwing Hunt set out for El Muerto Springs.

Not far from where the Monterrey loot was buried, they ran into four Mexicans, looking for a lost mine. But since the prospectors had run out of funds with which to pursue their search for riches, the Hughes' gang easily persuaded them to come along and work for them.

The four Mexican miners were instructed to dig a hole, not far from where the Monterrey haul was buried. This they did, eventually going down eighty-five feet, and then digging back under a rock shelf another eighteen feet. When the last bit of earth was taken from this deep hole, the twenty-five mule loads of gold and silver were lowered into it. Then, the gems, filched from various images in the cathedral, were buried, too, the container in which they were stowed being a tomato can.

Now that the Monterrey plunder, plus the money from the railroad, was deep in the earth, Hughes ordered the Mexicans to close the hole. This was done while the four outlaws sat under in the shade of a juniper tree, directing just how each shovelful of earth should be disposed. When at least the great treasure cache was covered, and smoothed over and planted with grasses and weeds, the desperados were faced with a problem.

What to do with the four Mexican miners?

Los muertos no hablan! was the immediate answer.

The four slain miners were buried in the hole which formerly had held the Monterrey loot.

Then, with plenty of dinero in their pokes, Jim Hughes, Red Curly, Zwing Hunt and Doctor Neal rode off on a pleasure jaunt. It was the last time they were to see El Muerto Springs, though they didn't know it.

They went to New Mexico and were joined by another outlaw, Russian Bill. The five men then rode into Silver City to have a little celebration—one that was their undoing.

A Stranger Declines a Drink

The five outlaws craved liquid refreshment, and promptly sought out a bar. Hughes, who liked everyone to drink with him, turned to a bar companion, and asked him to have a drink. The stranger declined.

"You're too nice to live in this country!" Hughes shouted and, whipping out a pistol, shot him.

As the peaceful stranger dropped to the floor, dead, the outlaws fled before the startled and horrified saloon patrons could make a move to intercept their flight.

It was this cold-blooded killing of a law-abiding man, more than any of their other heinous crimes, that roused public opinion against Hughes and his cronies. To make it really worthwhile to track down the desperadoes, an enormous reward was posted by the railroad for the Tombstone train robbers, and a huge posse was organized. And since everyone was pretty sure who the train robbers had been, Jim Hughes, Doctor Neal, Red Curly and Zwing Hunt were the men sought.

Neal was the first to feel the bite of lawman's lead. He was caught in their camp back of Silver City, and slain at once.

Zwing Hunt was the next to have the law clamp down on him. Shot in the legs when caught up with, he couldn't get away, and was captured by the posse. He was taken to Tombstone. As soon as his legs could support him, he escaped from the hospital. It was later reported that he was killed by the rampaging Apaches.

The next two to run afoul of the law were Russian Bill and Red Curly. They were caught in Shakespeare, and lynched, being hanged from the rafters of the dining room of the Pioneer House. It is said that Red Curly had some sort of map of the treasure cache at El Muerto Springs in his pockets, which was discovered after

he had been cut down.

Jim Hughes, ringleader of the murdering crew, was the only one to escape from the law. He was the owner of a Lordsburg saloon for a number of years, and then disappeared, presumably the victim of foul play.

But speculation concerning the amount of outlaw wealth buried at El Muerto Springs didn't die with the end of the Hughes gang. Citizens continued to wonder if it really were there. However, it wasn't until about ten years later that anyone made an attempt to locate it.

Stevens Seeks Riches

Then, fired by visions of easy wealth to be dug out of the ground, a man by the name of Stevens came to Silver City. From there, he went to the outlaws' New Mexican camp, to look for a clue that would unlock the riches at El Muerto Springs.

Stevens tried digging first in one spot, and then another. His pick finally hit a tin box. In it were some letters from Hughes' mother and a map of the El Muerto Springs territory, which had certain locations marked.

But Stevens was not familiar with that part of the country, and decided that he needed a partner to help him "prospect" for the Hughes gang's loot. He went to Valentine, in Jeff Davis County, Texas, and got in touch with Bill Cole, an old prospector.

And once Bill Cole saw that strangely-marked map, he was sure that Stevens had the right clue. He went out to El Muerto Springs, and after taking bearings from the map, started a shaft. At various levels, he found clues—chisel marks on stones, a horn button and pieces of rotted rope.

Bill Cole notified Stevens, who had gone back to New Mexico, of these finds. He also told him that one man couldn't dig an eighty-five-foot hole and then tunnel back another eighteen feet, as required by the map, and said that he needed capital to continue operations.

Stevens never answered Bill Cole's letter. So the old prospector tried to get capital from various Valentine residents, but without luck. The people of Jeff County did not believe in outlaw treasures. So, the old man had to go it alone.

Bill was almost down to the required depth when the Nemesis of all shaft-sinkers hit. Water flooded his deep hole. And try as he might, old Bill Cole was never able to get rid of the water which kept him from getting at the combined riches of the Monterrey loot and the railroad haul.

And today, water still prevents hopeful "prospectors" from learning whether the treasure is still there. And since it is true that *Los Muertos No Hablan,* it is doubtful that anyone ever will.

Unless, of course, some treasure-seeker of the future has better luck than old Bill Cole at El Muerto Springs!

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Page steadied carefully, gun muzzle following the dancing horse

Bounty Hunter

By WALT MOREY

Whichever way he turned, Ben Page was in a tight spot!

BEN PAGE reined in at the top of the hill, sat his saddle and stared gloomily down at his rolling acres. The afternoon sun looked brighter, somehow, the sky bluer. The rim of far off peaks even seemed nearer through the crisp, clear air. Even the rich, green carpet sweeping away, dotted with his small, purebred herd, looked greener today.

There nestled his new barn and corrals. The new three-room house, crisp, pink curtains at the windows, a white, glistening jewel in a field of green plush. The house he'd planned to bring his bride to tomorrow. There, below, lay his and Karen's dreams, where he'd worked,

sweat and planned alone for three endless years.

Tomorrow was the day. Tomorrow, at long last, on the afternoon stage Karen would arrive, bubbling with excitement and expecting to be carried across the threshold of her new home to begin a new life.

Ben Page looked long and intently at the scene below. For him, it was the last time if things didn't go right in town. "By this time tomorrer," he thought bleakly, "I'll be carryin' Karen through that front door down there—or I'll be dead. Or mebbe I'll be runnin' like blazes with Sheriff Ed Watts on my trail—which is worse than bein' dead."

He had made up his mind he'd not just walk away and let Big Kirk Flint take over after all the work and time he'd put in. He hadn't the money or heart to go through this again. Next time it would take ten years, not three. Karen had agreed to wait, which surprised him. But before she had, she had nailed him down with stipulations.

"No more bounty hunting. I don't care if they are rustlers and murderers you bring in. You like the danger, the excitement of it too well. I can see it in your eyes every time you start out. There's a wild streak in you, Ben. You might have become one of the Robber's Roost gang if you hadn't started hunting them. Hunting them is making a gunman of you. I won't marry a gunman and I don't want the kind of money you get for bringing them in." Frank, honest Karen, who thought like a man.

HE UNDERSTOOD. Her father was one of the biggest ranchers in the Great Bend country. She wanted him to become the same. "We'll have our own spread," she had said. "I don't care how small. Dad began small, too."

He had found this place, out of state, in the Salmon River country and immediately proved up on it. He'd sunk his savings in a barn, corrals and getting together a small, blooded herd. If there had been wildness in him, working for himself, planning and hoping these three years had burned it out. He was anxious that Karen see that.

He spent all his cash and yet hadn't a house for Karen. Sam Clayburn, the banker, had obligingly called in Kirk Flint, big, successful cattleman who made private loans through the bank.

"A thousand?" Flint had said then, big and bluff. "Why, shore." A month ago the note came due and he'd explained to Flint:

"I figured too close and can't make it. But in sixty days I'll have hay and beef to market and can pay easy."

"Forget it," Flint had slapped him heartily. "For that long we'll just let the note ride."

This very morning one of Flint's riders had come by and notified him Flint wanted his money by noon tomorrow or he'd throw him off the land. At first he couldn't believe it. Then he remembered stories he'd heard of other similar deals of Flint's that he'd refused to believe at the time.

And tomorrow Karen arrived, expecting to be taken to a neat little white house with crisp, pink curtains in the windows. Anger had rushed fiercely through him then and he'd sworn he'd not walk meekly away. But Sam Clayburn was a good banker, and honest. He'd investigate first. Surely Sam would help him.

Page tugged his hat low over troubled eyes, turned his horse and rode swiftly towards town. If Flint had wanted his place he had played it smart. But what could the big cattleman do with this small spread?

He couldn't add it to his own. Flint's was ten miles away and Page had nothing on his small spread the big cattleman didn't have a hundred times over. He'd been trying all morning to figure Flint's reasons and had gotten nowhere.

Page was dismounting before the bank when Sheriff Ed Watts called from his office a few doors down: "Want'a see yuh, Page."

Ben Page hesitated, then swung down the boardwalk to Watts' office where the sheriff lounged tall and lean against the door frame. Years as a lawman had made him what he was, a rawhide-tough man, brown-burned by weather, with dust-gray eyes that on occasion glittered like an eagle's.

Watts was honest, impersonal and brutal in his judgment. His careless, indolent manner belied the blinding speed of his gun, the iron-clad rules he was capable of enforcing. Sleepy Ed Watts, the

sheriff who'd cleaned up Gateway in one wild, gunsmoking year that left four dead gunmen in the street.

"Uh—" Watts spat a brown stream expertly across the walk into the dust, wiped his mouth with a hard palm. "Come in, Page," the lawman began. "Come in."

"Later, got some business first."

"This's business." Watts ambled inside without looking back and slouched comfortably in his creaking swivel chair.

Page followed, tilted a chair against the wall and waited.

"Save me a trip to see yuh," Watts went on in the quiet, idle-sounding voice he always used. He leaned forward, shot a brown stream expertly into a spittoon six feet away. "Remember what I told yuh six months ago when yuh downed Ross Swann?"

"You put me on a year's probation and told me not to wear a gun. Well, I don't."

"Remember that tomorrer." And at Page's startled look: "Ain't much goes on I don't hear about."

"Then what would you do in my place?"

Watts idly laced long fingers across his lean middle. "Don't know all th' details. Was hopin' you'd tell me."

Page shrugged and explained. "Why not?" Watts listened, eyes half closed, jaws working methodically at the chew in his long cheek. At its conclusion the lawman said:

"Nice for Flint. Yore place's worth addin' to his."

"I don't think so. I'm ten miles away and it's too small for a big owner like Flint to try and run on its own." Page went on after a thoughtful moment, "How long have you known Flint?"

"Four, five years. He come in with a big chunk of money. Bought ten-thousand acres first crack. Been gobblin' up some smaller outfits one way an' another—but all legal. Never have no trouble with him."

"This's legal, too," Page said angrily. "But I'm not lettin' him get by with it."

WATTS came a little more erect and his softly-idle voice took on some of the toughness he was noted for. "Don't do nothin', Page. I knew when yuh shot Ross Swann yuh thought too much with a gun in yore fist."

"I explained that," Page said carefully. "The Swann twins was Robber's Roost men. I'd brought in Ross on a murder charge and he'd beat it. Him and his brother Nick then swore they'd get me. How Ross found me here I don't know. But I let him start the trouble, remember?"

"Yuh still downed him before he got his gun clear. Any man that fast spells gunslinger to me. An' there ain't been a gunslinger in this town since I cleaned it out, an' there ain't goin' to be. Bust that year's probation in a gun fight an' I'll slap yuh behind bars if I got to deputize every man in the county to help."

"What do you want me to do?" Page demanded heatedly.

"Don't start trouble. I don't like Flint, as a man or a cattleman, an' he's pullin' a lowdown trick. But my job's keepin' peace in this county an' I'll do anythin' necessary to keep it. If yuh can't pay Flint off, then I'm afraid yuh lose. Don't make it worse by gettin' outside th' law, too."

Page stood up, looking down on the long, thin sheriff. What he saw was an emotionless, impersonal man to whom but one thing mattered. The utter peace and quiet of his domain. No use explaining the work, dreams, the heartaches that had gone into that small spread of his. Watts knew but one thing—the handling, the taming of men. He knew it well. "That all, Watts?" Page asked in a sharp voice.

"Uh—" Watts fired again at the spittoon with perfect aim. "Yep, that's all."

Page walked out and up the street to the Stockman's bank.

Sam Clayburn was in his private office, a gray-haired kindly-faced little man who looked suddenly worried and embarrassed when Page entered. "I heard, Ben," he said hurriedly. "I'm devilish sorry."

"You know about it, too?"

"Naturally. I have the mortgage in my safe."

"Then yuh know why I'm here, Sam. Can yuh help me?"

Clayburn hesitated and color crept into his round cheeks. "I'd like to, Ben," he said in a low voice. "I'd sure like to."

"The place is worth it. I can pay it back in a month."

"I know. But—I just can't do it."

"I'm stuck, Sam. I've got to raise a

thousand. You admit it's worth it. Then, why—?"

Clayburn hesitated, digging nervous fingers through his thin, white hair.

"Kirk Flint does a lot of business with me, Ben," he said reluctantly. "If he should withdraw his account and spread the word around that he had, it would start a run that would wipe me out. He's threatened that if I give you a loan."

"Then he wants to break me. Why, Sam? My spread's too small, and not worth anythin' to him ten miles away. Has he got another buyer for it?"

"I don't think so. He just threatened if I advanced you a loan. That's all I know."

"Then Flint runs this bank, eh?" Page exploded.

"That's about it," a solid-sounding voice said.

Page whirled. Flint, big, brawny, in immaculate attire consisting of hand-stitched boots, black pants, silk shirt and wide-brimmed white hat, filled the doorway. His broad, beefy face held a tight-lipped, superior smile. A heavy gun-belt was slung across his middle and against the dapper and immaculate attire the worn gun handle, scarred belt and holster were out of place.

"That's about right, ain't it, Clayburn?" he repeated in an overbearing voice. He watched the flush creep higher in the banker's cheeks before he turned his black eyes on Page. Gone was the back-slapping heartiness of before and in its place was the cold ruthlessness of a cattle baron.

Page knew he was seeing Flint as he really was for the first time.

"Yuh got my message?" Flint asked.

"You know I did."

"Yuh got th' money?"

"Of course not." Page fought down a flare of temper. "What about the sixty days yuh promised me?"

"That was a month ago," Flint snapped.

"Sam'll give me a loan if yuh don't buck it."

Flint shot a black look at the banker. "He knows what I'll do if he does," he threatened.

"You want'a drive me out, Flint. Why? Yuh don't want my little spread."

"Never mind why," Flint threw at him. "Have that thousand tomorrer noon or I'll throw yuh off."

ANGER boiled recklessly through Page and he stepped close to the big man. "I hope yuh try," he grated.

Flint ran insolent eyes over him. "Bounty hunter, I won't dirty my hands on yuh," the big cattleman said. "I brought along a man who'll take care of that. A friend o' yores whose been waitin' a long time t' meet yuh." He turned his big body away from the doorway, letting another man step up beside him.

This one was short, stocky, with a tremendous chest and shoulders and gorilla-long arms. His dark face was made uglier by a long scar that ran from eye to chin. A great hate rushed out of his eyes at Ben Page. Nick Swann! Ross Swann's twin brother.

"Been three years, bounty hunter," Swann said in a harsh voice. "Did yuh think I'd forgot?"

"Never gave it a thought," Page answered and felt tension lift and race through him.

"Three years's a long time," Swann snarled. "I'll be thinkin' o' Ross tomorrer."

"Think of what happened to him, too, Nick."

"Ross wasn't fast with a gun," Nick replied wickedly.

There was a step in the bank behind them. They heard Sheriff Ed Watts' voice speak with exaggerated idleness: "Any trouble, fellers?"

Swann whirled. Page saw Watts' slouchy figure then, standing before them, arms hanging loosely at his sides, lean jaws working methodically at the bulge in his cheek. He seemed utterly calm and oblivious of danger.

"Right on th' job, eh, Sheriff?" Flint said with a depreciatory laugh. "I was just tellin' Page t' have my money tomorer or pull his freight off my land."

Watts nodded, eyes on Swann, bright and piercing. "I heard yuh." Then, bluntly: "Don't much like th' men yuh hire, Flint. Keep this 'un out of town when he's packin' a gun."

"Yuh got plenty t' do takin' care o' yore own business, Sheriff."

"That's why I'm tellin' yuh," Watts said easily. Flint ignored the sheriff.

"Yuh know what t' do," the big cattleman said to the banker.

"I—I've told Mr. Page I can't advance

a loan," Clayburn replied uncomfortably.

Flint nodded, turned his black eyes on Page. "We'll see yuh tomorrer noon, bounty hunter." He swung away calling to Nick Swann, "Let's go," and stalked importantly out the door.

"Kind'a proddy," Sheriff Watts murmured blandly. He glanced along the floor, into Clayburn's office, behind the desk. Finally, he went to the window, shoved it up, shot a brown stream into the sunlight and slammed the window. "Don't like them fellers a little bit."

"You know who Swann is?" Page asked now.

"Shore."

"You expect me to let them throw me off?" he demanded angrily.

"If yuh can't pay Flint, he's within th' law tossin' yuh off his land. If yuh start trouble over that, yuh'll be dead wrong an' I'll be after yuh."

Page gave Watts a long, hard look, then swung sharply out of the bank and mounted his horse.

He gave the horse its head and let his mind run riot. If he hadn't built the house he'd be in the clear now. But he couldn't ask Karen to leave the fine, big ranch-house she'd known, for a shack. Tomorrow he wouldn't even have a shack. All he could tell her after she'd waited three years and come four hundred miles was, "I've got no house, no ranch, no money. We can't even get married."

BEN PAGE now thought of Nick Swann. Nick looked uglier, more dangerous than ever. He wondered if Nick was still a Robber's Roost man. This was a fact, he knew, that had not been proven in court at any time. Strange how the Swann twins had found him. Of course, there'd be a reckoning with Nick.

And there was Flint, a black-eyed dandy who acted and looked more like a successful gambler or saloon owner than a cattleman. He wondered, vaguely, why Flint continued to wear the old six-gun and scarred belt and holster when everything else about him was so immaculate.

Ben Page wondered, too, how Flint had gotten onto Nick Swann whose hangout was up in the rugged hills of another state. That set in motion a chain of thought that occupied his mind most of the way home.

Page put up his horse, fed and watered those in the home pasture, then made his customary rounds of barn, corrals and out-buildings, the pride of ownership rising strong within him.

He stopped on the porch, catching the faint fume of fresh paint, and watched the sun drop behind the distant peaks in a blaze of color that tinted his rolling acres with gold. Tomorrow Kirk Flint would own all this. Blindly he turned into the house, his mind reaching forward towards some decision not yet made.

Next morning, after he'd finished the chores, Ben Page again strapped the gun about his middle. During the night he had thought it out, carefully, coolly, and had made his decision.

The meeting with Nick Swann was inevitable and would come off regardless of what happened between himself and Flint. This was a good place to meet him, though he knew that in meeting Swann he would also have to meet Flint. Flint would pass up no chance to kill him.

It would be over before Karen arrived and, if by chance he came through, he'd be gone with Sheriff Ed Watts on his trail. Karen wouldn't want to see him. She'd think, when she heard, he'd gone back to the old wild ways again and as long as he had nothing to offer, it was best she thought that. His decision made, he sat down on the front steps and gloomily rolled a cigarette, prepared to wait.

It was not yet noon when they took shape coming across his rolling acres. He watched them move carefully, slowly, scanning each spot where he might hide until they spied him and then came on directly at him. Page stood up, advanced into the yard and waited. Tension leaped and raced through him as of old, tightening all his muscles.

They rounded the corner of the barn, saw his horse in the pasture, his waiting attitude, then came on, Flint dropping slightly behind Swann.

Page watched Swann's ugly face take on shape and clearness until fifty feet away he stopped and Flint moved up beside him, dwarfing him with his size.

"Ain't ready to go, eh?" Flint began in a domineering voice. "Mebbe yuh don't figger on leavin'?"

"Not until I'm ready." Only years of training held Page's temper in check be-

fore this man. "You made shore I'd be here by comin' early, Flint."

"Nick!" Flint called in a harsh voice.

Nick Swann was out of saddle with surprising quickness and came forward, knees slightly bent, arms hanging, resembling nothing so much as a gorilla. Page kept his eyes on Swann and threw at Flint:

"You've wanted me out of here a long time. I just found out why."

"Nick!" Flint's voice was a pushing rush.

Nick Swann's body settled lower on his short legs. "It's been a long time, bounty hunter," he said in a deadly voice. "This's for Ross."

He hesitated, savoring the moment, perhaps, looking for some sign of fear in Page, and the long scar on his cheek brought a twisted viciousness to his dark face. In that moment, clear, unmistakeable, beyond the hill, came the rattle of wheels over rock.

The unexpected sound seemed to hurry Swann. Page caught the slight lift of his shoulder as his hand streaked for his gun. On that movement Page drew and fired. He saw the bullet flutter the shirt on Swann's chest and drive him backward. Then, surprisingly, he steadied and his gun roared. Page felt the bullet burn across his shoulder.

A second shot lashed at him and he caught Flint awkwardly leveling a gun across his horse's neck. He snapped a shot at Flint, missed. The horse jumped and Flint's next shot went wild. Page steadied carefully, gun muzzle following the dancing horse. At his next shot Flint slumped forward in the saddle, the horse plunged, threw him headlong, and then rushed away.

Swann was on hands and knees reaching for his gun but a foot away. His hand stretched out, the terrible effort contorting his ugly face. He shut his eyes, opened them and looked at the gun. Then his head dropped, something like a sigh came out of him and he slid forward on his face.

Page did not need to go closer to know the hellion was dead. He walked to Flint sprawled on his back. One look was enough. As he turned away he heard again the ring of wheels, the thunder of running hoofs.

A BUGGY broke over the hill, the horses running hard. In the seat, Sheriff Ed Watts held the reins. Beside the lawman was another figure, one hand flung up, holding tight to a hat. Only one person in the world lifted an arm in that unconscious, graceful gesture. Karen!

Page felt no surge of elation at seeing her now. His thoughts turned immediately to Watts and he thought, "He won't have to chase me after all."

Watts pulled the foam-flecked team to a halt in the yard and Karen jumped out crying in a glad voice: "Ben, Oh, Ben!" and rushed into his arms. When she drew back she saw the spreading stain on his shoulder.

"Ben, you're hurt!" she said in a startled voice.

"Just a scratch." Now was the time to show her, to let her see how her fears for him had come true. He nodded with his head and she turned, following his eyes and saw the huddled forms.

"That's Nick Swann," he said in a dead voice. "Yuh know why he came. The other is known as Kirk Flint. He—he owned the place."

"I know," she murmured. "The sheriff told me." He saw shock stiffen her body and pull her lips into a straight line. She turned her head away and a slight shudder ran through her. Then the stiffness left her and her lips took on their normal curve again.

She was a Western girl and violent death was no stranger to her. Page felt her putting the picture of it from her mind as though there were more important things to consider. She looked beyond him at the neat little white house with its smell of fresh paint and its pink curtains in the windows.

Watts came up and spoke in his idle voice. "Yuh got 'em both. Kind of thought if I got yore lady here she might hold yuh down from a killin' or somethin' foolish. Uh—" He turned his head, shot a brown stream into the grass and carefully wiped his mouth with a hard palm. "Stage stays over at Trail so I went down an' got her. We drove most all night an' was still five minutes late."

"Just as well," Page said with a tired shrug. "I couldn't duck Swann and now I know I'd had to fight Flint sooner or later. He didn't really want my spread. Flint

wanted to get rid of me because he was afraid."

"Afraid!"

"It's quite a story. About five years ago the Robber's Roost gang held up a bank and a young fellow on the street got a shot at the leader, a big man known as Gus Benson, and broke his arm. It was thought the arm slowed him up so much he quit. Mebbe. But here's the rest as I've pieced it together. Benson had plenty of money when he quit. He shaved off his mustache, moved to another state, bought a big spread and lived the life of a rich cattle owner."

"Yuh mean, Flint—!"

"Wait. A couple of years later a young fellow moved into the neighborhood who knew of this outlaw, had once seen him and might identify him. He took an easy way to get rid of the man by sending for an old enemy who had been a member of his gang."

"Ross Swann?"

"Right. When that didn't work he sent for the other brother and in the meantime found a chance to get the young fellow in debt to him and freeze him out. One way or another he won."

"Yuh don't say? Hm-m-m, uh—" Watts fired into the grass. "How'd yuh get wise?"

"When I saw Nick Swann with him yesterday I got suspicious and began figgerin' back. The old scarred belt and gun he always wore, as well as his size. And he just didn't look like a cattleman. I had some old reward posters in a trunk. This picture was there." Page drew a faded "wanted" poster from his pocket and passed it to Watts.

"That's mostly forgotten now," Ben Page went on. "But take those fancy clothes off Flint, add a mustache and yuh've got Gus Benson. Roll up his sleeve and yuh'll find his right arm's got a bullet scar. I know by the way he slung his gun it's been broke. I was the one broke it, standin' in front of the bank that time, Sheriff. Now, yuh still want'a take me in?"

Watts scratched his long jaw thoughtfully.

"I did say as how I would—"

"Of course he won't," Karen interrupted. "You hadn't any choice with Swann, and in Oregon he's an outlaw. So is this Flint, or Benson." She was looking intently at the house as she talked. "Besides, Benson didn't give you a chance to pay back. A man has a right to fight for his future and—and for his home."

"Guess mebbe yuh was keepin' th' peace—in a way," Watts agreed. "That's all I'm interested in. A nice quiet county. Uh—" He fired into the grass again. "I see they's a reward for this Benson. Two thousand dollars."

Page glanced at Karen knowing how she felt about such money. "I don't want any part of it," he said hurriedly.

"Two thousand!" Karen exclaimed. "Of course you'll take it."

"But you said once—"

"We'll put another room right here," Karen was saying. "And I want a rose bush here, and another here, and—"

Page looked at her, astonished, then began to smile and stepped eagerly towards her. Sheriff Watts turned his head, spat into the grass, and carefully kept looking the other way.

Coming in the Next Issue

NOBODY'S GOATS

***A Cactus County Story by* L. P. HOLMES**

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 7)

deep narrow gorge separating the Rattlesnake and Cedar mountains, and the Shoshone Dam, one of the highest in the world.

The Buffalo Bill Museum on the Cody road is a reproduction of the old T.E. ranch home of Buffalo Bill. It is a log house and contains personal belongings and collections of Cody and local historical material.

Jim Bridger was a pioneer character who, in the yarns that are told of the pioneer days, always seems to have a prominent place. He was one of the unique and colorful characters who were often around Fort Laramie.

General William Ashley went to Wyoming in 1822 to engage in the fur trade and trapping. He engaged among other men Jim Bridger, who was then only 18 years old, but even then a remarkable young fellow, quiet, unassuming, afraid of nothing and possessing a remarkable faculty for remembering landmarks and finding his way about the wild country.

Among those engaged by General Ashley was William Sublette. Great success accompanied their trapping efforts and after the big rendezvous in the spring of 1823 when the many loaded canoes went down the Missouri to the fur markets in St. Louis, everyone believed there was money in furs.

Men of Courage

Those trappers' and traders' rendezvous must have been interesting. They might have been classed as a kind of reunion where trappers and traders met and exchanged goods, sold furs to the fur buyers, traded information, gambled, drank and fought occasionally. They were anything but society affairs. These men were tough and roughly clad, they were men who had seen hardships, danger, and in some cases intense privation, but they were men of courage, men who always believed that they could outwit the Indians, and failing in this they felt that they could outfight the redskins and many times they did.

There were hostile Indians and friendly Indians in that section of the West. Some of the trappers married Indian women, and through their marriages into the tribes had more or less influence with the Indians.

After Ashley had made a fortune as a fur trader he sold out to William Sublette, Robert Campbell, Jim Bridger and others.

The Rev. Samuel Parker (who preached the first religious sermon in Wyoming) and Dr. Marcus Whitman (who went as a missionary to the Indians) visited the rendezvous and said they found a motley assembly of strange individuals: trappers, accompanied by their squaw wives, and half-breed children, hunters, Indians, traders and scouts.

Here they met Jim Bridger, and the Reverend Parker tells the story of Dr. Whitman extracting a three-inch arrowhead from Bridger's shoulder, where it had lodged for a year, having been inflicted by a Blackfoot Indian.

A Great Scout

Of Bridger they said he was a remarkable man, one who knew the habits and ways of the Indians, and reported that those who followed his advice usually came through with whole skins, and their scalps still intact. While he had no knowledge of engineering, Bridger's ability to map out any part of the territory from memory was said to be uncanny. His wonderful ability as a guide must have been a gift, as in this respect he surpassed others whose experience had been as great, but who never attained the high standard of efficiency which so characterized his work as a scout.

In 1834, when William Sublette, Robert Campbell, and Jim Bridger went into that section of the territory near where Fort Laramie was later built, they were trapping for beaver, and were in constant danger as there were roving bands of Crows and Pawnees who were very annoying with their constant thieving, and who would not hesitate to shoot an arrow at any unsuspecting trapper that they could get close enough to without being detected.

To protect themselves the trappers were obliged to build some sort of shelter, and that same year they built upon the site that afterward became known as Fort Laramie. The construction consisted of a square stockade fifteen feet high, and with a number of houses inside for themselves and employees.

Campbell and William Sublette sold out their interest to Jim Bridger and Milton Sublette and three or four others who went into partnership with the American Fur Company. They sent men into the Black

Hills, to invite the Sioux Indians, who claimed that section of the country, to move nearer the newly organized trading post where they might trap and sell their furs to the traders. The Indians, bringing with them more than a hundred lodges, moved rapidly onto the territory claimed also by the Crows and Pawnees, driving out the latter with a thoroughness that has always characterized the aggressive Sioux.

First Called for John

Two years later the stockade was reconstructed at a cost of about $10,000. It was first called Fort John, but later was given the name of Fort Laramie because of the river upon whose banks it had been built.

In the reconstruction of the stockade it was built so that on one side there were the store rooms, offices, and dwellings of the company officials and employees, while on the other side were built, within the big enclosure, corrals, stables and such so that in the presence of dangerous Indians in the vicinity the horses, mules, and such animals could be crowded into the fort and be protected from being stolen or run off by the Indians.

The entrance to the fort was an alley-like affair, with an outer gate and an inner gate, and thus any suspicious Indian could be admitted to this alley through the outer gate while the inner gate remained closed fast and tight. Thus the suspicioned one would be in a measure trapped, while just above this alleyway there was a window from which the fellow could be interviewed, and his business with the company transacted or progressed to a point where he was either dismissed or admitted to the inside.

For fifteen years the stockade was the principal trading post of that great section of country. Weary and worn travelers along the Oregon Trail were always glad to reach the fort, for they knew, or felt, that here they would be safe from warlike Indians. Here the travelers would rest for a time, and gain what information they could about what lay ahead of them on the trail.

The officials of the Fur Trading Co. who were stationed at the fort ruled that supposedly friendly Indians might be camped just outside the fort—and while some of these same Indians might follow a lone traveler or two and murder and rob them, while they were in the vicinity of the fort they pretended to be very friendly with the whites.

In 1849 The United States Government bought the old trading post and established an army there, and for a long time it still remained a place along the Oregon Trail that the traveler was glad to reach, for what with the danger of the trail, the security and safety afforded by the fort made it stand out to the traveling pioneers like an oasis in the desert.

Ahead of the Law

In his eagerness to get west, where most pioneers felt sure that fortune awaited them, the pioneer got ahead of the law. He pushed ahead, leaving law and order to follow. The pioneer had to be strong to hold his own against the Indians, to drag a living from the rough, and in some places, barren land, and there were many other difficulties that confronted the early settlers of the West.

Nine out of ten of those who moved into the unknown West were good citizens and hard workers. Of the remaining ten percent a large number were riffraff, scoundrels and criminals, professional gamblers.

Thugs and parasites on society flocked to the frontier towns and mining camps, drawn by the rich pickings to be had in settlements where spending was free and order not yet entrenched. More than four thousand homicides were committed in California during the five years which followed the discovery of gold.

The Frontier tried a man. Conditions were hard. It was easier to idle in town and let others do the hot and wearing work. It seemed to be safer to live by one's wits, to gamble, steal, ally oneself with the worst element, than to plow the fields with the risk of the often-present Indian attack.

The Battle Against Crime

The pioneer settlers wanted law. They drew together in many cases and formulated codes. Strong fighting men were chosen to see that order was enforced. Many times the very men responsible for depredations got into the law enforcement bodies and so planned their activities in a manner that did little to retard crime.

The sheriff, the marshal, the ranger, were agents who fought the battle for their communities. Sometimes they were killers themselves, chosen because of their experience

with weapons, chosen because of their reputation, which was expected and did in many cases make the evil-doers hunt other climates.

Many a good citizen and many an officer gave his life in trying to bring wrongdoers to justice, but it is heartening to know that in the long run what they stood for prevailed.

It was a great struggle, that winning of the West, and it was accomplished by brave men, good men, and in most cases those men were backed by just as good and brave women, women who dared the hardships and the dangers of the wilderness along with their husbands and fathers, women who had faith that in time right would triumph.

While such places as Fort Laramie offered a haven of safety and security while one was there, when one left, going in either direction, he was again on his own. He had to be wary of Indians and highwaymen along the trail. The Old Oregon Trail was frought with danger practically all the way, and it took men, strong men, to travel it and get to their destination!

Adios.

—FOGHORN CLANCY

OUR NEXT ISSUE

FROM time to time during the history of our exciting country, organized mobs have found it profitable to move into certain geographic sections of this land and concentrate far-flung and powerful operations on one, or sometimes several phases of beyond-the-law endeavor.

Sixty or so years before crime became big business, however, a band of owlhoots operated in a region of our West which bore a deceivingly pleasant name— The Sunstone Hills. Jed Beecher's Horshshoe Ranch was their headquarters and from that base, Beecher's Bunch ranged far and wide, in-

[*Turn page*]

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dulging in all manner of criminal activity—the entire gamut from horse stealing to train robbery. They were truly big time, never before equaled in the records of lawmen. Beecher's Bunch might have functioned years longer than they did had it not been for one man.

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D. B. Newton, a writer who really knows his West, tells the amazing story of Wayne Morgan and Beecher's Bunch in his great novel, RIDERS OF THE SHADOW TRAIL. The yarn will appear in the next issue of MASKER RIDER WESTERN—and it's one of the best we've ever given you.

When the tale opens we meet Dan Kent, a young rancher, trailing a pack of horse thieves through a dry, narrow canyon. For better than one hundred powdery parched miles Dan has been following the easy-to-read sign of the rustlers, hoping eventually to recover forty head of prime Morgan Horses that the owlhoots whooped off his spread. Here, in D. B. Newton's own words, is the action:

The tracks were fresh. Dan knelt in the dirt, put his fingers into the prints of the unshod hoofs and knew from the ease with which the sharp edges crumbled under his touch that the tracks could have been made no more than half an hour before.

Dan stood up and turned to his mount, forcing action from a body seemingly on the verge

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of collapse. There had been no rest for him on this trail, but the fire of battle shone in his red-rimmed and aching eyes. Retribution lay just ahead and in his eagerness to settle the score with the scar-faced leader of the men who had stolen his herd, the young horse rancher was forgetful of everything else—caution, hunger and bone-deep weariness itself.

He came out of a draw, topped a ridge, saw below the entrance to a steep-walled canyon. He rode straight forward. The canyon walls soon lifted on either side, his gelding's irons clanged on bare stone. And suddenly the first shot came —from *behind* him!

Right hand grabbing for six-gun, he started to slide around in saddle. He caught a glimpse of a tall, steeple-hatted figure and then from somewhere ahead a second shot blasted. Kent felt the impact of the bullet as it slammed into the horse between his knees, kicked free of the stirrups as the beast fell down lifeless.

He hit solid rock flooring and lay dazed a moment. He had over-ridden them and he was surrounded.

"He ain't dead yet," Dan heard a voice shout. "Finish him!" He tried to find cover behind his dead mount, but it was slight. Bullets showered around him, spitting from rifles he could not see.

He fired wildly at the killers hidden in the rocks and thought about his ranch and how he had spent his life. Somehow he knew that he

[*Turn page*]

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would never again see his home again. He found his Colt empty and shifted behind his protection, trying to reach cartridges and reload.

A bullet took him in the side, slammed him hard against the earth. Pain held him in a terrible grip, blooming within his body. *Does it hurt this much to die*, he thought.

Suddenly he heard a new yell from the hidden killers different from their shouts of triumph. They sounded afraid. Through a red haze Dan Kent looked and understood.

High on the canyon rim a black clad rider sat astride a powerfully muscled stallion. His black cape billowed out behind him and he was silhouetted against the sky by the last rays of the dying sun. The outlaws screamed their cry of terror and then Dan Kent knew that the horseman thundering down the slope was the legendary Masked Rider.

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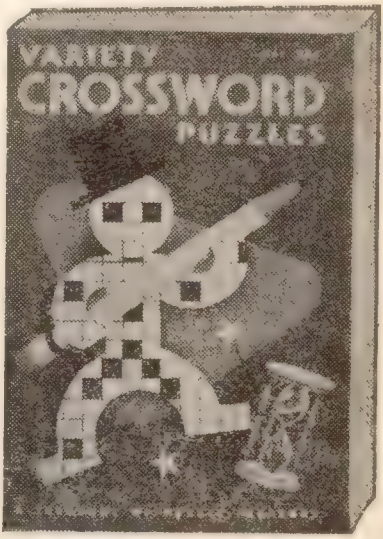

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throw down at the RIDERS OF THE SHADOW TRAIL in the next smashing issue of MASKER RIDER WESTERN. Incidentally, we've also corralled a sprightly cavvy of short stories for our next issue, which we're sure you'll enjoy. And just neatly to round out the issue, we've included a splendid array of fact articles and features.

The next number of MASKED RIDER WESTERN will be a gala event. Look forward to it!

MAIL CALL

OUR mail was mighty heavy this time around and it's gratifying to know that so many of our friends all over the country

[*Turn page*]

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think enough of us to dash off a short note and send it along. If *you* haven't penned us a communication, why not sit down now and give us your opinion of the stories in MASKED RIDER WESTERN, or just write us about anything else that strikes your fancy. We'd sure like to hear from everybody, and even though we can only quote from a few out of the letters received, we appreciate every missive deeply and give them all our fullest attention.

Our first letter comes from Lone Star territory and reads thusly:

Your article in the February issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN by John L. Parker was especially interesting to an old-timer like me who happened on the scene a year or so after Black Jack was hanged at Clayton, New Mexico. Your writer forgot to mention the fact that the rope pulled Black Jack's head clear off his neck. Doctor Slack, the attending physician, proclaimed Black Jack dead without even taking his pulse.

The old cemetery where the outlaw was buried was moved to another location a few years ago. When they dug up Black Jack's coffin the box had rotted and one of Jack's boots fell out. Some of the women around almost had a hair pulling match to see who'd get it for a souvenir.—*Perry Cravens, Lubbock, Texas.*

And that Perry, is what we call a gruesome, but danged interesting sidelight on the end of poor old Black Jack. Glad to have you with us and write anytime you take a notion. Now here's a pat on the cheek from a little shaver:

I am eleven years old and like your magazine very much. I think the Masked Rider should appear on the screen.—*Barnie Trivette, Port Allegany, Pa.*

Thanks, Barnie, we love you for enjoying our magazine. And now, to wind things up, here's one from twenty-five-cent-cigar country:

I really like MASKED RIDER WESTERN. I read my first issue this February and I thought all the stories were swell; but I enjoyed Ike, Puggy and Shoo-fly best of all. My mother thinks Wayne Morgan is wonderful.—*Mrs. Lenora Havemann, Tampa, Florida.*

Both you and your mother, Mrs. Havemann, have supremely good taste. Thanks for writing, folks. Let's hear from you again. Kindly address all letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y. Be seeing you next issue.

—THE EDITOR

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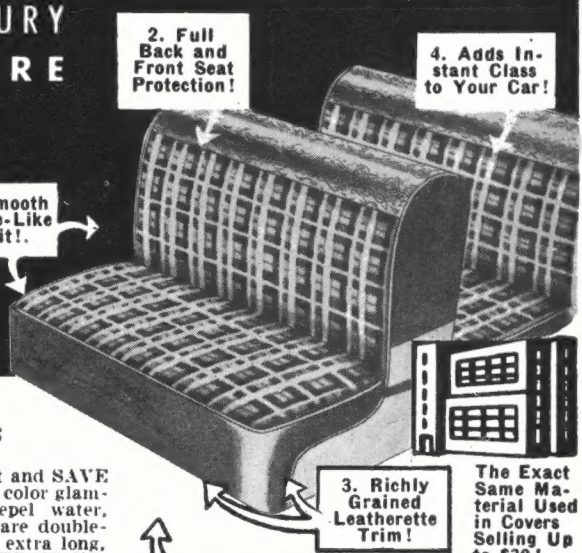
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